FOOL'S GOAL

B·M·BOWER

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By B. M. Bower

Good Indian
Lonesome Land
The Ranch at the Wolverine
The Flying U's Last Stand
The Heritage of the Sioux
Starr, of the Desert
Cabin Fever
Skyrider
Rim o' the World
The Quirt
Cow-Country
Casey Ryan
The Trail of the White Mule
The Voice at Johnnywater
The Parowan Bonanza
The Eagle's Wing
The Bellehelen Mine
Desert Brew
Meadowlark Basin
Black Thunder
Van Patten
White Wolves
The Adam Chasers
Points West
Hay-Wire
The Swallowfork Bulls
Rodeo
Fool's Goal

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By

B. M. BOWER

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CHAPTER ONE

MONEY WILL TALK

THE hoarse bellow of noon whistles shattered the cloistered quiet of the vice-president's office in a certain bank down near the stockyards. Mr. Kittridge cleared his throat and lifted his eyeglasses from his thin nose, the other hand going out to finger certain papers lying before him on the desk.

"If you want to put your money into land and cattle," he said, "that is your own affair. I can doubtless arrange the matter through some of our Western correspondents. I suppose there isn't a bank out there that hasn't been obliged to take in such a property as you apparently want, on foreclosures. I haven't a doubt that, given the locality you desire, we can find you what you want."

"But that isn't the way I want it, Mr. Kittridge. I didn't want any cut-and-dried arrangement through the banks. I want to knock around

through the West and get my information first-hand, through actual personal contact with the conditions I shall have to meet. I want to be in a position to snap up any bargain I might happen to run across, so I'll take cash—"

"And risk your life doing it," snapped Mr. Kittridge, stung out of his calm. "You certainly must realize what will happen if you carry a large sum of money around with you."

"Don't you think I'm able to take care of it?"

"I certainly do not, Mr. Emery. I do not think any man is safe with a large sum of money on his person. It is absolutely unnecessary to take the risk. Any bank will forward a draft on us, in the event of your making an investment of any kind. We shall be glad to wire payment if you desire. Currency is dangerous, not only to you but to the man who is paid in cash. Murder and robbery follow on the heels of cash money, as you must know, Mr. Emery. Your father, I am sure, never dreamed of such a move as this, or he would have made some provision against it."

"Yes, I guess he would, all right. Dad thought he dealt in cattle, but he didn't, really. He dealt in dollars. He sat in an office and juggled train-loads of steers on paper. Everything was done on paper. Why, he never had twenty-five dollars in his pocket at one time in his life, so far as I know.

Checks—checks—bank balances—well, I'm going to carry on from a little different angle, Mr. Kittridge.

"I want to see and feel and *know* the West. All my life I've watched trains of cattle unloaded here at the yards; now I'm going to see where they all come from. I know quite a few Westerners too; men that have come in with the cattle. They're different from any one here, but I don't know why they should be—barring certain colloquialisms born of their trade. It was all right for Dad to sit in an office and count cattle by carloads, but I've got to watch 'em grow. And money will talk, when I'm ready to have it speak. It isn't such a wild notion, when you consider the kind of men I'll be dealing with. A few thousands in cash will look a heap bigger than a check for the same amount. I—why, I'd take gold coin if I could carry it!"

"There's really no reason for such a course, and I cannot advise—"

"Well, I didn't expect you to approve or to advise it," Dale replied easily. "I realize that there's no reason on earth for what I'm doing except that I want to do it. I couldn't expect a banker to see my point of view. You've got your burglar-proof vaults and you always see money kept inside those vaults or behind your steel-

grilled windows. You like to push it through, a few dollars at a time, and if a man asks for a lot you wonder why. You folks are like Dad; you juggle millions on paper, most of the time, and the cash you want to see locked safely away. You think dollars are dangerous—" He laughed suddenly and silently, his eyes opening wide and then half closing upon the light of mirth within. "Well, I've decided that I'm a gambler at heart," he chuckled. "I've studied psychology in books till I'm pretty well fed up on it. I'm going to take a course of what you might call field work. I'm in the mood to gamble a little with life; with danger, if you want to put it that way."

Again he laughed that silent laugh with the sudden flash of his eyes, and Mr. Kittridge, who had seen the trick in Dale's father and knew what it meant, gave up all idea of argument; and to prove it he closed his lips in a thin, straight line.

"So many bright young men go West to find their fortune," Dale added. "It will be interesting to reverse the process and take mine with me."

He had no expectation of being taken literally, but Mr. Kittridge adjusted his glasses again upon his high, thin nose and picked up a paper.

"Your real estate can hardly be carried off in your pocket, so we will leave that aside, having already disposed of the matter for the present.

You have to your credit with us fifty-five thousand, seven hundred dollars. In what denomination do you wish to have the money, Mr. Emery?"

Dale stared for a moment, then laughed and got up.

"Oh, as large as you conveniently can," he said carelessly. "I'll call in to-morrow, if you like, Mr. Kittridge. Oh, by the way, give me two or three hundred in small bills, will you? Expense money, you know. See you to-morrow. Good-by."

Outside the bank he stopped and stood in the shelter of the deep doorway out of the wind while he lighted a cigarette, and his shoulders lifted themselves impatiently.

"Darn fool! Or maybe not, either. Maybe he thought he could scare me out with that bluff. Shot the whole pile at me, and what will I do with all that money?" Dale shrugged again. He had meant to take five thousand, or maybe ten at most. But Kittridge had taken him at his word. "Mad, maybe, because the bank isn't going to get its usual percentage if I do deal for a ranch. Yes, Kittridge certainly was sore. Threw the whole thing at me when he found he couldn't run the show!"

His cigarette going to his satisfaction, Dale

stepped out into the throng and walked briskly northward. Kittridge had challenged his nerve and his intelligence, and he probably expected Dale to back water and accept a book or two of traveler's checks and go ambling from town to town like any tourist. Well, Dale didn't intend to do anything of the sort, though he felt pretty much a fool now that he was away from the presence of the man who had unconsciously egged him into so fantastic a decision. Kittridge was so blamed conservative; that was probably what had started it all. For Dale had been trained to conservatism all his life and he was sick of it. Business conventions had been the breath of life to his dad, but they certainly were not going to be saddled upon the son. Dale had walked a block when of a sudden he laughed.

"All right, we'll let it ride that way," he said to himself. "I guess I can handle it—but it sure is a queer way to start out—handicapped with money, instead of with the lack of it. I wonder, now, just how—"

His thoughts broke there when he whistled a yellow cab to the curb. The address he gave was somewhere near the middle of the Loop, and as the cab speeded up, he settled back to smoke and think. It was going to be something of a problem, as he realized now that he faced it

squarely. He hardly knew whether to resent Kittridge's unimaginative interpretation of his little declaration of independence or whether to laugh at the joke on himself. His mood alternated between the two but it is interesting to note that not once did he consider going back and telling Kittridge that he had not meant to be quite so radical in his ranch hunting. Instead of that, he dismissed the cab in front of Brentano's and started a round of purposeful shopping. He did not intend to take a great deal of luggage with him, but he did mean to take plenty of time in selecting exactly what he wanted.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CHLOROFORM MYSTERY

DALE lifted heavy eyelids and stared stupidly around the room, blinking a good deal over the effect to orientate himself. His lips felt stiff and sore, though for the life of him he could not think why they should. He raised a hand to investigate and felt dully amazed that his whole arm should feel heavy, his fingers awkward. A vile taste was in his mouth—something he ought to recognize, though his inert brain could not at once grasp the elusive quality of familiarity. Sluggishly he pondered, his eyes closing again while he did so, his tongue moving questioningly along his smarting lips.

"Chloroform!" Though he did not make a sound, his brain formed the word with the abrupt clarity of speech. He struggled to an elbow, hung there groggily with his eyes shut, then swung his bare feet out upon the Brussels carpet of the hotel room he occupied. For a full minute he sat slumped upon the side of the bed, staring owlishly, head between pressed palms, elbows propped

insecurely upon his knees. Chloroform! He could taste it now to his very toes, and the flavor nauseated him almost past endurance. Once more his fingers passed gently across his lips and a fuller understanding seeped in upon him. He had not lived all his life in a city to be puzzled now by his condition, nor did he need to glance around the room to confirm his suspicion.

He got up presently and tottered to the dresser, leaning against it while he inspected his mouth. Lips seared and swollen with the stuff used upon him, eyes bloodshot and hair tousled, he presented so unlovely a sight that he turned away in disgust, languidly flapping a hand back at his reflection. On the bed again, with the covers pulled over him to shut out the chill of a crisp Wyoming morning, he battled with the aftermath of the anæsthetic and in time overcame it sufficiently to do a little coherent thinking.

Of course he had been robbed. He wondered how the thieves had managed to get in, then decided that they had entered by way of the window. He remembered that he had lowered the upper sash a foot or so for ventilation and had left the lower sash closed, and now the flapping curtains proclaimed the fact that the lower sash had been pushed up as far as it would go and the up-

per sash was closed. Perfectly simple, and very fortunate for him; that breeze blowing in had probably done much to call him back from the final sleep. They had used enough chloroform to kill an elephant, it seemed to him. His system was clogged with it. He could smell it on every breath he exhaled; the sweetish taste of it was in his mouth.

"Made a good job of it," his brain said distinctly, and somehow the sentence removed the obligation of immediate action. He pulled the covers higher over his shoulder, closed his eyes and let himself slide back into oblivion.

When he woke again, the breeze was still and the room was warm. From the way the sun was shining full across the foot of his bed he knew it must be nearly noon, and though the sweet, furry taste of chloroform was still in his mouth, it was not so pronounced and his body did not feel quite so heavy. But his head ached and his lips still felt puffed and sore, and altogether he was in no happy frame of mind as he sat up in bed, glowering at the room.

Everything he possessed had been ransacked. His clothes lay just where they had been dropped from the hands of the thieves. Though it was only a guess, Dale had no doubt there had been more than two men in his room; he did not be-

lieve one man alone would have tackled the job. His wallet he had pushed down between the sheets when he got in last night, and now he turned the sheet back over the foot of the bed for a complete search. From the look of the room he at first thought they must have missed the wallet, but they had been more thorough than he would have believed possible. The wallet was gone.

He leaned and picked up the coat he had worn the day before—a gray shadow-plaid with a thread of lavender. It lay on the chair beside the bed, though he had hung it in the closet with the rest of his suits which he had unpacked, thinking he would probably spend some days in Cheyenne. The lining of the coat had been slit down each under-arm seam, and the interlining on the shoulders and under the arms had been pulled loose. Dale frowned when he saw that, and got out of bed to make a more systematic examination of his other garments.

Every coat he had was cut in exactly the same fashion, and so were his vests, which he seldom wore. Even the one dinner coat he had brought with him had been searched. His suit case and big Gladstone bag showed slitted linings, his steamer trunk had been likewise examined. His few books sprawled open on the floor, where they had been flung in spite.

Dale picked them up one by one, straightened the creased leaves with careful fingers and laid them on the dresser. Shelley, three volumes of Shakespeare, Browning and two books of Kipling's poems. The assortment was not what one would expect a young fellow like Dale Emery to be carrying, and a somewhat unusual feature of the little collection was that they were uniformly bound in red morocco with his name stamped in gold in the lower righthand corner; a booklover's indulgence, one knew at a glance. As Dale recovered them one by one, his face brightened a little. His books, at least, had escaped the general mutilation.

With Browning held absently in his hand, he sat down on the bed to consider the situation. They couldn't have been hunting his wallet in the lining of his luggage, even granting that they had not looked in the bed until after they had searched the room. They had taken his watch and his tie pin, a fire opal of exceptional beauty, but it was undoubtedly his money they were after, and not only the money he carried in the wallet, though it had contained a couple of hundred or so; enough to justify the chloroform, perhaps, but not enough to account for the painstaking search they had made.

No, they had wanted more. They wanted all

of it—all he had drawn from the bank. But how had they known about that? His bank in Chicago surely would not peddle the news, and he doubted whether any one save Kittridge and the assistant cashier who had given him the money would know about it. On second thought he decided that the paying out of so much cash would probably show on the books, but if any one in that conservative institution had wanted to rob him he wouldn't have waited all this while, surely. Dale hadn't left Chicago for some days after he got the money, and for two days he had kept it at home in one of his grips, just as if it weren't money at all but a package of little value. It had worried him so little that he had decided that since no one knew he had it, there was no reason whatever for being afraid of it. Now he was faced with the fact that some one had known.

Before leaving home he had disposed of the money in the safest way he could think of. Looking at the garment-strewn room he thought of the exact manner of its concealment and grinned. No, it was certain that while they must have known he was carrying it, they did not know how he had hidden it. No one, not even Kittridge, would ever guess that. On the way out to Cheyenne he had talked with one or two of the passengers casually, as men do while smoking, but he had not dis-

cussed his own affairs, or given his name, or told any one his business. He was very certain of that. Most of the time he had read, or looked out at the reeling landscape and dreamed of the cattle ranch he would one day own.

It was the Pullman conductor who had recommended this hotel, the Rocky Mountain, when he had arrived in Cheyenne yesterday. He had wandered around the town a bit, had eaten a good dinner and had sat in the lobby until bedtime talking with a tall, lean, handsome old fellow with a soft voice and a pleasant manner and the inimitable vernacular which proclaimed him range-bred. They had talked of the early days in Wyoming, and of the men who had flourished for a time in the West and died as they had lived. They had discussed cattle and range conditions, and the old fellow had seemed a gold mine of information. Dale had regretted that he was not a story writer so that he could use some of the stuff.

Had he mentioned to this man—Quincy Burnett was his name—that he had come prepared to invest in a cattle ranch? Dale tried to remember just what he had said; surely not that he had a large sum of money with him. He was not that big a fool. He had asked about the chance of getting hold of a good place, and Burnett had

told him it ought to be easy, and had explained in great detail just why. Cattle raising wasn't what it used to be, he had said. Although cattle were "up", most of the ranchers were poor and saddled with debt. Some had gone broke and had to quit, because they had not been able to weather the black time when cattle had suddenly "dropped." Dale knew something of that too, from hearing his father talk prices.

No, he did not believe Burnett had anything to do with the robbery. If he had, then Dale did not know anything at all about human nature. Yet Burnett was the only man with whom he had talked in Cheyenne.

His thoughts swung back to Kittridge and the bank that handled his inheritance. He didn't believe they had anything to do with it either, and yet they were the only ones who had known about the money. No bystander could have seen him receive it, for he had gone into the cashier's office and the assistant cashier had brought the money in a neat package, had counted it there on the desk and had received Dale's check for the amount. Why, for all the people outside knew, he might have been in there borrowing or paying back a loan. He had carried a brief case; so far as appearances went he might even have been an agent for something.

Kittridge—had old Kittridge wanted to scare him out? Had he framed a practical joke just to show him what a fool he was? Dale felt his sore lips and shook his head. He couldn't imagine Kittridge doing anything of the kind; he was too old-fashioned, too conservative. It was a mystery, and he couldn't solve it sitting there in his pajamas thinking about it.

He got up and called the office on the phone, and said that he wanted to see the manager at once. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed again and held his head while he waited. When the manager tapped on the door, Dale let him in and went back to bed.

The manager, a neat little man with a round, boyish face and blond hair parted just off center and combed back in two little waves, glanced surprisedly around the room and approached the bed warily, one hand clasping the other.

"Well, you see what happened, don't you?" Dale demanded, with mild reproach. "I've been robbed. They pickled me in chloroform and gutted the room."

"I'd better get the police," said the manager, eyeing the disorder. "Did you lose anything of value, Mr. Emery?"

"Oh, no!" Dale snorted. "Didn't I tell you

they cleaned me out? Something over two hundred dollars in my wallet, to say nothing of—what else they took."

"Papers?" the manager was staring at the suit case and empty trunk.

"Yes—something like that. I feel like the devil. Can you get a doctor that'll fix me up and keep his mouth shut? I don't want this peddled all over the place. And take my clothes to a tailor and have them fixed, will you? Never mind the police—"

"We'll have to mind," the manager told him. "I can't let burglary happen in my house and do nothing about it. We'll keep it as quiet as possible, of course, but we must take some action." He went to the house phone, called for a number, and talked crisply with some one whom he addressed as Chief.

"Varney himself is coming over, Mr. Emery," he said, when the one-sided conversation was ended. "He was just leaving for lunch when I caught him. He asked if we needed a doctor and I told him we did, so he'll attend to that. It's lucky we can have the Chief himself, since you want to keep it quiet." He stood in the middle of the room, looking around at the confusion, his lips pursed. "The Chief will want to see this just as it is," he said. "When he's through, I'll have

things put in order for you. It's fortunate you are alive, Mr. Emery."

At that moment Dale rather doubted the statement, but he didn't care enough about it to dispute with the manager, who went on talking and surmising until the chief of police came in, a doctor at his heels. They seemed capable men, both of them, and Dale was glad enough to place himself in their hands, for the time being, at least. He did not need the doctor to tell him what a close call he had had, nor the chief of police to declare that the thieves must have been terribly intent on getting something they believed Dale had in his possession. The wallet alone would not account for the intensity of their search, Varney said over and over. They were after something else, and he was inclined to agree with the hotel manager that the robbers must have known of some valuable papers which they were determined to get hold of.

"Oh, yes, the deed to the old homestead!" growled Dale, and turned his back upon the room and the mystery.

"If I knew what they were after, I'd know what to look for," Varney persisted, standing over the bed.

"How do I know what they wanted? I didn't ask them; didn't get a chance." Dale closed his

eyes. "I feel rotten," he grumbled. "For the Lord's sake, let me alone!"

Varney grunted something under his breath and with another comprehensive glance around the room went off to take what measures he could to apprehend the thieves.

CHAPTER THREE

A FOOL AND HIS MONEY

WITH a muttered phrase which epitomized his opinion of all reporters, Dale threw down the newspapers he had been reading and reached for a package of cigarettes, since the burglars had taken his monogrammed silver case along with the rest of their harvest. Some one near by chuckled, and Dale's scowling glance turned belligerently that way, coming to rest upon a tall, good-natured young fellow with a wide, smiling mouth and hair of that rich auburn which is just a shade too dark to be called red. Dale's resentfully questioning look was met by eyes blue and disarmingly straightforward.

"Tough luck, all right," the fellow said, still smiling. "Bad enough to be robbed, without being spread-eagled all over the front page." He was standing beside a slot machine where for a nickel one guessed card combinations, and now he turned toward it, chose his cards, slipped his nickel into the slot and got a package of gum for

reward. He was peeling off the wrapper to extract a stick when Dale decided to be human.

"What I can't understand is how they could reel off a string of numbers like they have here and claim they're the numbers of banknotes I lost," he complained. "I never gave the police any numbers."

"You didn't see last night's papers, I guess. No, that's right—you hadn't got over the chloroform, they said. Varney wired back to Chicago—you registered from there, didn't you? Well, the bank where you got your cash wired out the numbers of the bills. My brother works in a bank here," he exclaimed. "But it was in the paper too. I read it before I asked Jim."

"The bank in Chicago wired the numbers?" Dale bit his lip. "Sure a snappy piece of work," he commented dryly.

"The sooner the numbers are out, the better chance there is to get hold of the crooks," the other pointed out. "Publicity is the one thing they can't stand. It sews them up in a sack. All the banks and stores are on the lookout now for bills with those numbers. The crooks oughta know that by this time, though. They'll lay low."

While Dale morosely watched him, the young man fed another nickel to the slot machine, this time without avail. Chewing two sticks of the

gum he had won the first try, he sauntered over to the big window with its row of padded leather chairs, chose one, and was just settling himself into it when his attention was attracted to a man walking past the window.

"Hey, Bill!" he called eagerly, tapping on the plate glass with his fingers. "What's the grand rush?" The man outside stopped and turned, grinning.

"Why, hello, Hugh!" he called exuberantly. The two met in the doorway, shook hands and stood there for a minute before they walked away, still talking.

Dale looked after them with a twinge of envy. They knew each other, they had things of mutual interest to talk about, they could walk into places together and greet other friends. For the first time since leaving home he was conscious of feeling lonesome. He couldn't talk to any one with that freedom which only long acquaintance can give, and yet he felt the need of discussing this mystery of his with some one he knew he could trust.

For instance, the banks must know the exact amount of money he had drawn from his account in Chicago and presumably brought to Cheyenne with him. This young fellow must also know, since his brother worked in one of the banks here. And while the paper had contented itself with

vague phrases calculated to whet any man's curiosity, *"Chicago Man Loses Fortune"* was the headline they had used, what followed did not minimize the caption. The banks certainly must know the denomination of every bill. Dale had withdrawn only fifty thousand, two hundred dollars from his account in Kittridge's bank, at the last minute deciding to leave a balance there, and the chief of police undoubtedly knew how much the thieves must have taken. There was no telling how far the startling news had seeped into the town, but gossip probably was already naming figures.

But how did any one know *before* the robbery? The question struck sharply across Dale's thoughts, to return again and again. Even if Kittridge did have the numbers wired out here, that didn't clear the thing up. *Somebody* knew before that. Varney must have guessed that the thieves knew exactly what to look for, and so would every one who stopped to think a minute. Even the tailor who mended Dale's clothes must see the significance of the slit linings in all the coats.

Dale smoked meditatively, staring at the passers-by who came and went in the thin, intermittent stream of small affairs; big-hatted men with the peculiar, bow-legged walk that betrays the range man used to riding and to stiff leather

chaps; preoccupied business men, women hurrying by with the intent look of shoppers; loitering time-killers staring into windows; clucking wagons and trucks. Occasional horsemen jogged past the hotel, and his eyes followed these with interest, longing to be riding with them. Then his attention was diverted from the street as snatches of conversation floated in to him from the pool room just off the lobby as some one passed through and left the door open.

"Damn' chump—packin' a wad like that in the first place." (Kittridge would certainly agree with that fellow!)

"These rich young squirts—"and the click of balls as the speaker interrupted himself.

Some one laughed. "A fool and his money!" he chortled.

"Well, a fool's gold'll buy as much as if he had good sense," another made trite comment.

"But not for him it won't," retorted the voice that had laughed. "Cleaned him to the bone. Serves him damn right too. Anybody that'll pack fifty thousand dollars around with him had *ought* to be robbed."

So the story was complete and gossip had the exact sum! Dale dropped his half-smoked cigarette into the nearest ash tray and walked out into the street, glanced this way and that until he dis-

covered the place he was looking for, crossed to the other side and walked into a bank. At the Notes and Exchange window a man came forward to serve him, his ready smile bringing to his face a likeness to the tawny-haired young fellow Dale had seen at the hotel. Dale smiled back and felt almost acquainted.

"And get it here by wire, will you, please?" he said, as he pushed a draft under the grating. "You doubtless know why."

The man looked at the modest amount on the face of the draft and smiled again at Dale.

"I can cash this for you now, if you like, Mr. Emery. We've been in communication with your bank concerning you—in fact, we're their Cheyenne correspondent. If you'll wait just a minute I'll give you the money."

"You know, this is mighty decent of you." Dale flushed a little as he took the money. "Folks must think I'm the prize fool—"

"Or braver than most of us," the other supplemented with a pleasant little nod, glancing over Dale's shoulder as those behind grilled windows are wont to do when the next in line is waiting. "Please call on us if we can serve you in any way."

Dale thanked him and turned away, feeling a little glow of gratitude for the friendly offer.

While other clients of the bank glanced at him as if they knew who he was and were naturally curious, he stopped by a desk long enough to single out a ten-dollar bill for immediate use and to tuck the other ninety dollars into an inside pocket before he went out to look for a store where they sold bill folds. He glanced back at the grilled window and saw that J. D. Mowerby was the name of the obliging young man who had served him. J. for James, of course—the young fellow with the gum had called his brother Jim. Jim and Hugh Mowerby; already he was beginning to learn something about the people here.

At the leather-goods store the clerk scanned the ten-dollar bill and wanted to talk of the robbery, but Dale was unresponsive. How had the thieves learned of the fortune in cash he was carrying to Cheyenne? He would give a good deal to know that, for therein lay the clue to their identity, if only he could find it. And find that clue he must, somehow. It was absolutely vital that he should know. But he felt that he dared not tell even Varney, nor Kittridge himself, just why. His one chance, it seemed to him, lay in keeping his own counsel and in waiting until the thieves betrayed themselves; which they would do, he felt sure. They must, in the light of what he knew. He would only have to bide his time.

Burnett was in the lobby when he returned, and his thin, handsome face was unsmiling and full of concern as he spoke to Dale.

"I just saw Varney down the street a piece," he began, without much prelude. "He says they haven't got a line on them fellows yet. Course, I don't s'pose you got a sight of 'em, did you? Got at you while you was asleep, as I heard it. Wonder is, they didn't kill you with that stuff. Varney told me they'd soaked a bath towel and there was enough on it when he got there to put most anybody to sleep. Sit down, Mr. Emery. I want to talk to you about this. Maybe you think it ain't my put-in, but I've been a peace officer myself a good many years, though I ain't working at it now. Resigned last summer to let in Burke, the sheriff. You talked with him yet? He's a good man; better than Varney, according to my notion."

"No, I haven't talked with any one, much. Not officially, I mean." Dale sat down beside Burnett, glad of the old man's friendliness. "I felt rotten yesterday, and to-day—well, the town thinks I'm crazy or a fool, to have all that money. It's a wonder they let me run loose!"

"Well, it was yours," Burnett observed dryly. "Varney made sure of that, soon as he found out how much it really was. He's kinda peeved that

you didn't tell him yourself, Mr. Emery. No, you had a right to carry it, I guess, but it sure was taking a big risk." He stopped and canted one graying eyebrow upwards as he looked at Dale, his eyes a keen, cold blue that seemed to read a man's most secret thoughts. "Who all knew you had that amount of money on you?" he asked suddenly.

"Nobody out here," Dale said, returning the old man's stare. "My bankers, of course."

"And who else?" Burnett's gaze never shifted a hair's breadth. He seemed to be gauging Dale with some mental measurement of his own. "*Somebody* knew."

"One man," Dale admitted, flushing. "A friend—a fraternity brother. I'd trust him with my soul."

"Sometimes we trust friends to our sorrow," said Burnett, sighing without being conscious of the fact. "You trust him, but do you *know* he didn't tell?"

"Well—yes, I *know*."

"You've got some proof he didn't?"

"Yes," said Dale after a perceptible hesitation, "I have proof."

"Humph." Burnett turned away his eyes then and pulled a cigar from his pocket, absently biting off the end while his fingers explored a pocket

for a match. He got the cigar lighted and smoked in silence for another minute.

"Because they searched so many places?" he queried then. "That might of been a blind, to throw you off the track."

Dale shook his head, his lids opening and then half closing over a gleam in his eyes which Burnett was not slow to catch.

"It's fine to trust your friends," he said in his soft drawl, "but I was in the sheriff's office a good many years, Mr. Emery. Fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money to tempt any man with. Is this friend rich?"

"Richer than I am, though he doesn't spend as much, maybe. He's in business and making money right along. Fifty thousand isn't so much to him. Besides—I *know* he didn't tell."

Burnett took the cigar from his mouth, glanced around the empty lobby and looked again suddenly and keenly at Dale.

"You mean—*they didn't get it?*"

He watched Dale, saw his eyes flicker in spite of himself, and chuckled.

"That's your high trump," he said softly. "Did you tell anybody?"

"I haven't told you," Dale countered gruffly. "If you want to jump at a conclusion that's your lookout."

"Oh, yes, you have told me," Burnett retorted, still in an undertone. "I don't know as any one else would have got it, but I did. That's your high trump and you want to hang on to it. Don't let anybody else find that out and you've got a chance to land 'em. But—" his face sobered and he laid an impressive finger on Dale's knee, "—*they* know, and they know *you* know. They'll try again, Mr. Emery, unless—" he stopped to consider—"unless you can convince 'em you didn't bring that money with you, after all." He drew deeply upon the cigar. "But they'll try again, first chance they get."

"That," said Dale grimly, "is what I'm hoping they'll do."

CHAPTER FOUR

"SOMEBODY KNEW!"

THE tawny-haired young man strolled in, with a nod to Burnett and a half-smiling look of recognition for Dale. Burnett crooked an authoritative finger and he came over, his hands in his trousers pockets, the faint suggestion of a swagger in the set of his wide shoulders. A bigger man than his brother in the bank, Dale thought; bigger and younger, with the look of an open-air life that sat well upon him.

"Hugh, I want you to meet Mr. Emery, the fellow that was chloroformed and robbed," Burnett said, as he and Dale rose. "This is Hugh Mowerby—lives out near my place," he added.

"Met him unofficially this afternoon, Quin," Hugh said, as he held out his hand. "Glad to know you, Mr. Emery. Hope this little experience won't sour you on Wyoming."

"Not at all. It could have happened in Chicago just as easily as here."

"Would have, probably, if you'd stuck around long enough. Somebody trailed you out, most likely. Don't you think so, Quin?"

"That's about it, I guess," drawled Burnett. "Somebody was probably hangin' around the bank when he got it and trailed him out here."

"Well, I better put in a word for the Stockgrowers' Trust and Savings, I reckon, and tell Mr. Emery he oughta put his money in Jim's bank."

"If you'd told me sooner, it might have helped," Dale agreed, smiling a little. "I was over there, Mr. Mowerby, and I think I met your brother."

"Yeah? Well, Jim's a good old scout. He's the cashier and what he says goes around there." He lighted a cigarette with negligent precision. "Going to stick around awhile? I s'pose you'll have to, while the sheriff's office gets busy on the robbery."

"I'll have to anyway. I'd like to land a job if I can," Dale told him. Then his glance went to Burnett, who was lazily smoking and staring out into the street. "I don't think I'll be buying a ranch right away, Mr. Burnett," he said meaningly. "Circumstances over which I had no control have changed my plans. If you know of any one who wants to hire a green hand, I'd appreciate the tip. I can ride," he added, "and the rest I can learn if I have the chance."

Burnett turned his fine, aristocratic head and

looked at Dale for a moment, then flicked the ash off his cigar.

"I don't know but what I could give you a job myself, if you can't do better," he said quietly. "It'd have to be in the hayfield, though, and that's hard work if you ain't used to it."

"Maybe we could give you a job up at our place," Hugh volunteered. "One of our riders is in town sick and there's nothing sure about his going back. I could let you know to-morrow, maybe."

Dale thanked them without committing himself to either offer and presently left them. He was still feeling the effects of his experience, he told them, and he thought he'd lie down for awhile.

As he turned from the desk with his key, he saw two women enter the lobby and go straight over to Burnett, and from the glimpse he had of the meeting he guessed that they were Burnett's wife and daughter. The old man had spoken of his "women folks" being in town with him, Dale remembered. The woman looked the motherly sort, so typical of country women. The other was young and smartly dressed and had nice hair, but since her back was toward him he was denied a look at her face. He did see, however, that Hugh Mowerby was gazing down upon her

with glowing eyes, so Dale guessed she must be pretty. Not that it mattered a great deal to him. He had burned quite a heap of sentimental keepsakes and letters before he left home and his attitude toward women was boyishly cynical. They were all alike, in his opinion; all ready to make a fool of a man. Still, it was interesting to know that Quin Burnett had a daughter who could wear her clothes like a city girl and could make a man stare at her the way Hugh Mowerby was staring. He caught himself almost regretting that he had left Burnett so soon.

"Fool," he told himself sharply, when he became aware of the direction his thoughts were taking, "you've burnt your fingers often enough to have some sense. Anyway, you've got something else to think about now."

Up in his room he began sorting over his belongings, making a more comprehensive examination of the damage his nocturnal visitors had done. His clothes had been returned from the tailor neatly mended, but he could still trace the slashes of the knife and note the precision with which it had been used. Not one unnecessary cut had been made, so far as he could see; none save those which would let exploring fingers search the interlining. His two big suit cases had come in for their share of suspicion, but the small, sole-

leather trunk was slashed with small systematic incisions which left no possible doubt that the vandals had known exactly what they were looking for and suspected him of using extra care in the hiding.

Yet they had missed the thing they were after! As he walked to the window and stood looking out, Dale's brief thrill of triumph merged into a frown of concentrated thought. The way into the room had been comparatively simple, for the roof of a lower building lay like a broad platform, almost on a level with the window-sill and no more than five or six feet away. A short plank brought up to the roof—and that could be done by way of a ladder—could bridge the space with no trouble at all. According to the newspaper account of the robbery, the building next door was used mostly for offices of the cheaper sort, vacated at night so that one might walk on the roof without the slightest danger of being heard from below. The rooms on either side of Dale's had been empty night before last, the manager had said, explaining that this was the dull season and he had given Dale that particular room because of its more commodious bath and the addition of a shower. Dale could not doubt the manager's hospitable intention, especially after he had inspected the neighboring rooms that morning and had seen

for himself just what the manager had meant; yet had he been placed in a room for the express purpose of being robbed, this probably would have been chosen for its convenience. Dale pondered that phase of the affair and finally dismissed it as accident, though he was certain that the thieves were familiar with the hotel. Indeed, Varney had gone into that yesterday and had established the fact that Dale himself was the only stranger registered at the Rocky Mountain that night. There were several guests, but they were all old patrons. Quin Burnett and his family were among them, but not Hugh Mowerby, who was probably staying with his brother. Dale thought he must hang around the hotel lobby on account of Burnett's daughter.

But all that didn't matter so much. The thing he had to foresee and provide against now was the thieves' next move, and it was that which held him staring out of the window at the lengthening shadows of the chimneys on all the housetops where the westering sun shone full. What would they do about it? They knew that he was on his guard now and that he, of course, knew they had failed to find the money—that in the wallet, though no small sum, not really counting in this game. They knew he was merely pretending that he had been robbed of the fifty thousand—and

he now saw what a blunder he had made. Why hadn't he said at once that he had left the money in Chicago? There was no possible reason for letting the police and the public assume that it had been stolen, no reason except that he had it with him in Cheyenne. They might, of course, think he had put it in the hotel safe, but even then he would have been likely to mention the fact to Varney. And every one knew that Varney believed it was gone. The numbers of the notes had been published, and Burnett said Varney was offended because Dale had kept the full extent of his loss a secret.

Burnett! How had Burnett been so keen as to guess that Dale still had the money? Or was it merely a guess? Dale shook his head unconsciously as the dark thought appeared. That fine old man with the aristocratic profile and whimsical, soft drawl a thief? With a wife and daughter like that? Again Dale shook his head in mute denial. No, Burnett couldn't be anything but what he seemed, a big-hearted, broad-minded range man, ex-sheriff, rancher, well-to-do and shrewd—

"But he was mighty darned quick at reading my mind, just the same," Dale muttered, rebellious toward the thought, even when it took form. "And he's the only one so far that's suspected

such a thing. Only the men who came in here looking for that money would know they didn't get it. And how the deuce did they know I had it? I'd trust Kittridge and his bunch—oh, Lord! Dad would have disowned me if he'd ever caught me thinking of such a thing. Rock of Ages, that bank, and that means Kittridge, of course. No, Burnett's a stranger to me, after all; but if he was in with them he'd be the last man to let on. Or would he? If a man like him goes crooked, there's no way of figuring what he'd do! He'd beat the devil himself for cunning. He'd figure that I'd never dream he'd have the nerve to tell me I had the money if he was the thief—oh, Heck!"

He turned impatiently away from the window and kicked one of his suit cases under the bed. He picked the top book off the neat pile on his dresser, opened it, read a line and flung it back. He was in no mood for poetry just then. He turned once more to the window.

"How the devil did they know I had it?" he doggedly attacked the question again. "Stan wouldn't tell—I'd stake my life on that. Stan's kept things under his hair that it would be a darned sight more temptation to spill. He doesn't give a hoot for money, anyway. All he cares about is his printing plant and books. And nobody

could have heard me tell Stan—they *couldn't.* If any one had," he added grimly, "I'd never have got as far as Cheyenne with it. Same at the bank. Chicago yeggs don't wait this long. I'd have been nailed before I left town.

"If it's Burnett—but how did he find out about it? He'd have to be a mind reader for certain. But *if* it's Burnett—well, I guess I'll take that job, even if it is in the hayfield."

It is a fact that the girl he had seen in the lobby talking to Burnett had nothing whatever to do with Dale's decision, for no thought of her entered his mind when he made it.

CHAPTER FIVE

COWMAN'S PARADISE

"HERE's where we take to horses," Burnett announced, as the car he was driving topped the summit of a six-mile grade and with steaming radiator began the descent into a thinly wooded valley. "That ranch you see down there is the post office and stage station, and beyond that there ain't a road a car could travel. Ain't a better range country layin' outdoors, though." From under the wide brim of his gray hat Burnett darted a glance away from the steep and winding road and across to the rugged country beyond. If a shadow crossed his face while he turned it that way, it was gone again almost before Dale was certain he had seen it.

"Do we pack in?" It was a perfectly natural question, in Dale's opinion, but the girl behind him giggled. Dale swung his head around and looked at her.

"Think of Mother going in with a pack outfit!" she explained her laughter.

"How do you s'pose I traveled before the dug

road was made?" Mrs. Burnett inquired tartly. "It ain't been but twelve years since we packed in, and I dunno but what I made the trip back and forth about as often as I do now. And I weighed just as much, or more," she added significantly. "I'd just as soon ride horseback as to have the daylights jolted out of me in that rocky creek bottom. Quin, are you going to try and go on to-day?"

"Well, we might. What d' you think? Might get started right after dinner if you ain't too tired. We'd make it by dark." With the strained attention of one not much used to the wheel, Burnett was devoting himself to the driving.

"Oh, what's the grand rush?" Donna Burnett protested, after the manner of youth. "There's going to be a dance to-night, Hugh told me. He came out this morning."

"Yeah, I know he did." Her father, having reached an easier stretch of road, cast a meaning glance back in her general direction. "Got the road marked up like twin snakes had wiggled along in the ruts. Break his neck some day, the way he slews around corners. I could tell his tire marks in Egypt!"

Donna laughed with that irrepressible giggle of hers which Dale had been in danger of misunderstanding.

"You wait till flying gets a little more practical and he'll quit the earth entirely," she prophesied glibly. "He's beginning to talk airplanes. Can't we stay for the dance, Dad? Please!"

"I oughta be gettin' back," Burnett temporized weakly. "I don't—"

"Well, you don't what?" his daughter impatiently prompted him, when he seemed unlikely to finish the sentence.

"I don't like leavin' Neal too much in charge," Burnett finished. "He's pretty faithful, but—"

"Well, half a day longer won't ruin the ranch, Dad. Dalton's will be peeved if we don't stay. And you want to, don't you, Mother?"

"I don't know as it makes any difference much to me," Mrs. Burnett replied with lukewarm interest. "I haven't got any string of fellows tagging after me for dances; and there won't be much sleep in the house with all the racket them Mowerby fellows can kick up. But you and your father settle it between you; it don't make much difference to me. I'm willin' to do what the rest of you do."

"All right, then we'll stay for the dance. Mr. Emery wants to view us roughnecks on our native heath, anyway. But if you still have as much as six bits in your pocket, Mr. Emery, you'd better

dig a hole and bury it, because we stop at nothing when we get started."

"Shame on you!" her mother reproved her, with superficial sharpness. "You never called yourself a roughneck till you'd been off to Denver to school. I don't know what girls are coming to."

"This one is coming to dinner, I hope. Aren't you starved, Mr. Emery?"

Dale nodded, smiled faintly, his thoughts upon the country spread roughly before him. No better range to be found anywhere, Burnett had said. He was an old cattleman, and it seemed good enough for him, even though he must know the West pretty thoroughly. Good range, mountains, plenty of water—

"Any trout streams up in these hills?" he asked abruptly, oblivious of the fact that he was swinging away from the subject Donna had chosen. "There ought to be good fishing, I should think."

"Fishing? I should say there is! Every blamed gulch has got a creek running through it, and every creek is full of trout. Hunting too; lots of game." Burnett slowed the car for a steep pitch, and the look of care which had been settling on his face lightened. The keen eyes he turned upon Dale were clear and untroubled. "County won't stand the expense of putting a road through—

they've got a good one west of here that runs up to Douglas—and that keeps the country about as it was thirty years ago. Dalton's, up ahead here, is as far as you can get with a car, and I'm kinda glad of it. Makes it kinda mean gettin' back and forth when you're in a hurry, but it saves the fishin' and huntin' and there ain't any real-estate sharks edgin' in with some scheme for sellin' off land in acre lots. No, sir, you don't catch me agitatin' for a highway cut through our country. It's easy enough to trail our cattle out, and we're used to it."

"You didn't live here when you were sheriff, though?"

"No, I wasn't here much of the time then; too unhandy gettin' back an' forth. I moved the folks in to town while I was in office and sent the girls to school."

The shadow had fallen again upon his fine old face. Did he regret having resigned? Dale wondered, but it was not a question he cared to ask.

"Sounds like a cowman's paradise," he observed instead. "It must be pretty nearly perfect if you're satisfied with it."

"Ain't a better cow country on God's earth," Burnett once more asserted and turned his attention again to driving.

Dale was content to gaze at the valley whose

northern rim they were descending. The silvery trunks of the quaking aspens fascinated him; the swift-moving ribbon of shining river showing here and there among the trees made his fingers itch for his rod and flies. The vivid green of the meadows, the wandering groups of grazing horses and cattle in the higher pastures, the roofs of the ranch buildings beyond such pole corrals as he had read about, gave him the odd sensation of stepping into a Western movie and seeing it come suddenly to life, himself a part of it. It was what he had always longed for, what he had secretly dreamed about, while his father plodded on with his cold calculations in the office, thinking of cattle only as so much beef on the hoof with a market value of so many cents a pound live weight. That viewpoint had always roused a dull resentment in Dale. To him, cattle were not just so many pounds of beef. He had never gone near the stockyards if he could help it because he could not endure the sight of those penned animals waiting for the slaughter, or listen to their never-ending chant of misery, by day and by night lowing for the wind-swept ranges they had left. As far back as he could remember Dale had hated the yards and the tragedy pent within them; the staring eyes, the ceaseless bellowing of the herds.

This was different, though if he thought far enough he must see the stockyards of Chicago as the ultimate goal, the end of the road those frisky calves over there were inexorably traveling. But the road itself was a pleasant one, Dale thought; especially this particular stretch of it. Even cattle couldn't hope to live forever, and out here one could forget the other side of the picture.

They passed a small, frame schoolhouse set in a grove of aspens, and presently the place called Dalton's came into view. A ranch in the beginning, it had too evidently outgrown that simple state and was now difficult to define in a word. Dalton's was not a village, for it still retained the semblance of a ranch; but it had a good-sized garage for the accommodation of visitors and what ranchers lived farther back in the hills; its stables would have served the needs of the average range town thirty years ago. Its corrals were more numerous than any ordinary ranch would ever need, and all the sidehills were fenced pasture land. The house itself had been added to so often that its original structure was quite lost in ells and wings and that simplest form of addition which is quaintly called a lean-to. Two dust-grimed cars with wind-whipped tops and dented fenders stood before the gateway as they drove up, and several saddle horses stood wild-eyed at

the hitch rail, their nostrils belled as they backed snorting to the end of their tie ropes when the Burnett car went by. Dale craned that way, grinning happily. It was seldom indeed that he had seen horses that were afraid of automobiles and the sight of their quivering bodies thrilled him pleasurably with a reassuring sense of having actually reached the land of high adventure.

Hugh Mowerby came sauntering out to meet them and to help with the varied assortment of packages and bundles that had been crowded into the roomy car. Standing back from the dusty fender, he attacked the knotted rope which lashed the suit cases and Dale's small leather trunk to the running board. As he lifted them off, his eyes definitely abandoned their quick sidelong glances toward Donna and fastened themselves upon the trunk, with its one handle made like a suit case for easy carrying.

"Ho-lee smoke!" he ejaculated, staring down at the knife cuts in the leather. "This the trademark your burglars left, Mr. Emery? They sure went right after it, by the looks." His gaze turned suddenly and searchingly upon Dale, who was waiting to carry the trunk in. "Say, you must have had that money hid like a guilty conscience!" he observed. "Or did they do it just to be ornery?"

"I forgot to ask them what the big idea was," Dale evaded, wishing now that he had left the telltale trunk in town.

"You didn't have all that dough tucked under this leather cover, did you?" Hugh pursued curiously. "It sure would've been a dandy place to hide it—"

"They probably thought that and tried the trunk first." Then with an unaccountable impulse he grinned at Hugh, his eyes closed to narrow slits. "The safest place in the world to hide a thing is in plain sight of every one," he said dryly, and lifted the trunk, its weight sagging his shoulder considerably.

"Say!" Hugh leaned to whisper the thought that seemed to have struck him at the moment. "Does that mean *they didn't get it?*"

Careful as he was, Burnett overheard him and wheeled, boring Hugh's face with his keen blue eyes. Dale glanced from one to the other and laughed a little as he turned away.

"Would I be hiring out to pitch hay if they hadn't cleaned me?" he parried lightly, his glance again going to Hugh.

"Well, you might, at that," Hugh retorted equably, following Dale with the two suit cases, Donna beside him with her arms full of packages.

"He says he hid it in plain sight, Donna. Where d' you suppose that would be?"

"Oh, how do you expect me to know? *I* didn't take his money—I'm sure of that. Who all are here, Hugh? Do you suppose the boys will be down from Dugout?"

"If they knew you'd be here they'd come, all right. Say," he added, lowering his voice as his pace slackened, "what d' you think of this Emery guy? You fall for him yet?"

"I don't know where you get the idea of that 'yet'," she snubbed him, then relented. "I don't think he counts for much. Think of any one being such a fool as to carry all that money around in his pocket! Did you ever hear of such an idiotic thing in your life? If he had it," she amended, with true sophomoric cynicism. "I don't believe it, myself. I think he was just trying to show off, and somebody took him seriously. Served him right, too."

"There might be something in that," Hugh agreed, looking at Dale's receding back.

"He acts as if he owned the earth and was thinking about having it remodelled," Donna made spiteful comment. "Oh, there's Bird and Dick! I wonder if Cynthy's coming down?"

"Ned wanted to bring her," Hugh said. "He asked me for the buggy team, but Cynthy seemed

to be kinda on the fence when I left. Your dad didn't want her to come with Ned, so Neal told me. He seems to have it in for our outfit lately. But Cynthy claimed she wanted to have things all slicked up for you when you got there. I don't know how it'll pan out."

"Cynthy's a darling," Donna attested warmly. "I wish she'd come—who cares how the old house looks? Oh, you don't know how good it seems to be back home again, Hugh!"

Though Dale, walking rather fast, had been keeping well in advance of the two, their talk had reached his ears and set his pride tingling with resentment. It seemed to him that Donna Burnett thought altogether too well of herself and her opinions, and he was glad that he had overheard what she said of him. Insincerity was one fault which Dale would not easily forgive, and though Donna was a very pretty girl, when they stood together on the porch his eyes no longer dwelt upon her face with pleasure. So far as he was concerned, Donna Burnett had suddenly receded into the background of the picture, and in his anger he promised himself that she would remain there.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SECOND ATTEMPT

UNDER cover of the rhythmic shuffle of dancing feet pulsing through the haunting melody of a waltz song he had last heard in the ballroom of the Drake Hotel, Dale left the house and walked down the path. A wave of lonesomeness that had been steadily rising within him threatened to engulf his spirits when suddenly that particular waltz began, and though he called himself a fool he wanted to get away from sight and sound of the revelers. He had not come to Wyoming, he told himself savagely, to dance with country flappers on a floor as rough as Dalton's dining room, to the puerile music of a cheap violin and a piano that needed tuning.

What he wanted was to get up into the hills that rose darkly under the starlight, every wooded canyon hinting at mystery and adventure, every valley a paradise of grass and water for the cattle he hoped to own. He wanted to start out at dawn with rod and creel and whip the shadowy pools where the speckled trout had not learned too great

a wariness and yet were able to put up a real fight. That trout streams played little part in the life of a ranch hand in haying time did not at first occur to him and when it did he brushed the thought aside as of little importance. Probably he would not actually go to work pitching hay; indeed, he doubted much whether Burnett expected it of him. It had been a mere camouflage of words calculated to further strengthen the general belief that he had been robbed of all he possessed, and now that he was out away from town, there was no valid reason why he should go on with it. Burnett knew he still had the money, and it was Burnett in whom he was particularly interested. These other ranchers didn't matter so much. They wouldn't be coming around during working hours, anyway, to see whether he was laboring with his hands; and he could easily arrange with Burnett for his board and room while he stayed.

A certain strain of persistence in Teasdale Emery, Senior, had been transmitted to the son. It cropped out now in his calm determination to go ahead with his plan of buying a ranch and cattle. Since his money was still his own, the sooner he invested it the sooner he would remove that particular temptation from his fellow men. Burnett could help him find the kind of place he had in mind, and in the meantime he hoped to

solve the mystery of that robbery. While he realized that if Burnett were a thief and a hypocrite he might try to get hold of the money through some crooked business deal, Dale thought he could guard against that—since he was not so ignorant of business as Kittridge had seemed to think. But unless Burnett had something to gain by urging him to buy some worthless property, Dale believed his advice would be worth taking. And he didn't see how he could go far wrong in buying grazing land in this part of the country. The price, of course, he could investigate. There must be plenty of honest men in the country.

He was standing outside the gate where a pine tree made a convenient brace for his back, his face upturned to the hills, watching a strange, pale glow in the clouds just over a ridge. Above his head the Milky Way showed a diamond-studded pathway across the sky, and in his nostrils was the clean breath of meadows mingled with the pungent odor of the pine boughs high over his head. The lights of the house on the knoll, the ebb and flow of the music, the occasional bursts of laughter blended pleasingly into the picture, now that he could enjoy it from a distance. A typical range party, he supposed, though they seemed to have all the late dances at the tips of their toes and to comport themselves

very much as his own crowd would have done in this same setting. Perhaps it was the modern note that had jarred upon him here in these wooded hills. He would have preferred them less sophisticated, more the picturesque characters of fiction. And as if his thought had conjured them from the night, two riders came slowly up and stopped near by, big range hats tilted a little over their brows, cigarettes glowing as they gazed up at the house.

"He oughta be here, all right," one said after a space of silence and apparent waiting. "He was coming out to-day, I'm sure of that."

"You'd think," said the other, "he'd kinda be on the watch for us. He knew we aimed to come."

"We might find out if his car's here," the first suggested, after another wait. "You go see while I keep an eye out for him here."

The second man turned and rode away a few steps, then leaned and peered toward the automobiles parked farther along the fence.

"He's here, all right. There's his car over there. I'd know it anywhere."

"Well, what you want to do?" the first asked impatiently. "I ain't going to set here all night. I'm hungry as a wolf. I'm going up to the house."

"Better not," the other advised. "Quin—"

"Say, who's that under that tree?" the first

called sharply, though his tone was guarded. "Grab a couple stars and come on out, brother. I've got it right on ya."

"No need to get excited, you fellows," Dale assured them, moving out into the dim light of the moon which was just showing a yellow rind over the ridge where the clouds had been brightening. "If this is feud stuff, you can count me out. I'm a stranger here."

"Stranger? Where from and why? What you cached under that tree for?"

Vaguely the gun in his hand shone in the moonlight, and Dale laughed to himself at the facility with which the scene had changed for him.

"What you doing down here? Waiting for somebody?" A harsh note of suspicion in the low voice warned Dale that this was no rough joking.

"No, I was just watching the moon come up over the mountain. It's a sight one doesn't often get in the city."

"Oh! You that Chicago guy that was robbed the other day?" A perceptible change manifested itself in the other's tone and manner.

"Yes, I'm the guy," Dale confessed, grinning a little.

"Oh!" The fellow put away his gun. "Well, you'll have to excuse me. I kinda thought you was somebody else. Who all's up at the house?"

"Lord, I don't know! I'm a stranger here. I was introduced to several, but I don't remember many names. Dick somebody—"

"Dick Tallant."

"Bird Ellis—that name stayed with me—"

"Bird, yes. Bird's all right; good boy."

"Well, then I met the Daltons, naturally, and of course there's Hugh Mowerby and Quin Burnett and family, and a girl or two I danced with. One tall blond and another little plump one."

"You don't happen to know if Neal Somers is there?"

"No, I don't. I heard the name, but—"

"Say, would you mind going up there and slippin' the word to—"

"No, I wouldn't do that," his companion interposed. "I'll go up myself. Won't take but a minute."

"You'll have a fight on your hands if you ain't careful."

"Oh, I guess not. Hold my horse a minute, will you?" Before Dale could object the man slipped from the saddle, thrust the reins into Dale's hand and went off up the path, walking quickly but making very little noise.

"So you'd rather watch the moon come up than stay in the house and dance," Dale's companion

observed with idle amusement. "If you wasn't packing so much money when you landed I'd say you're an artist. But they're always broke, according to all accounts."

"Somebody was certainly anxious that I should qualify, then. I'm not an artist, though. Good horse." Dale's free hand was busy, stroking the sweaty cheek of the friendly animal. "You've done some riding to-night; this fellow's pretty warm."

"Rough country back in there where we came from. Had to see a fellow we expected would be here, but the trouble with a dance is that it brings them that may have it in for you. A fellow's gotta be kinda cautious about bustin' in on a crowd up here. He don't know what kinda frame-up he's liable to run into." He glanced around, then reined his horse nearer to the great pine. "Might lead that cayuse over here in the shade," he suggested mildly. "No telling who all's here. I don't want any trouble, myself."

"Some sort of feud going on?" Dale obediently walked into the shadow, the horse following docilely at his heels.

"Well, I dunno as I'd call it a feud. I and Jack got into a kinda jam with an Iron Mountain bunch at a dance last winter. We polished 'em off pretty slick, but they ain't content to let it rest

there. They sent us word to come heeled next time and we're tryin' to sidestep any more trouble. I ain't been to a dance since, nor Jack either. You say Quin's here?"

"Yes, and I came out with him. You know him pretty well?"

The other waited while he lighted a cigarette.

"Oh, yeah—I know him, all right," he said then, dryly.

"He's not in on the feud, is he?" Dale tried to read the other's face, but there under the pine the gloom was too great.

"Quin? No, he ain't got a thing to do with it—so far as any one knows."

"That may mean almost anything. You don't like him, do you?"

"Me?" The rider affected a tone of surprise. "I never said a thing to make you think that."

"I sensed it in your tone," Dale said, moving closer. "I asked because—well, I've had occasion to study him pretty closely, and as a stranger here I'm rather at a disadvantage. I'd like to know something more about him. He seems pretty prominent. He was a sheriff for some years, I hear. What made him give it up? Do you know?"

"W-ell, I know some of the talk that's been going the rounds. Nothing I'd want to swear to."

"That means unfriendly talk, of course." Dale

waited and got no answer to that. "It's easy to accuse a man of being crooked," he said tentatively, "especially if he holds some office."

"And if there's crooked work goin' on," the other agreed.

"Was Burnett mixed up in it?" Dale persisted in the face of the stranger's very evident reluctance to talk.

"Quin? Not on your life! They don't make 'em any smarter than Quin," he added unguardedly. "He's got lots of friends too. Just lots of 'em."

"But you think he's crooked." Dale boldly declared.

"W-ell, I ain't saying a word against him."

"No," Dale grinned, "you've been careful not to."

Up at the house the dancing continued, the laughter breaking out now and then and drowning the music. From the sounds the rider called Jack had not precipitated any disturbance so far, but his partner was growing restive, his eyes constantly turning that way. Yet he seemed willing enough to talk, willing to be friendly. He wanted to know all about the robbery, and Dale described it briefly as a fair return for the meager information he had gleaned.

"W-ell, if I had fifty thousand dollars," the cowboy drawled when the story was finished, "I

sure wouldn't pack it around with me like that. What's the matter with banks? Don't folks use 'em any more in Chicago?"

"Sometimes. I just thought I'd be away out in the country and maybe the money would be handier if I saw the kind of place I wanted. Often these old duffers who live off by themselves would rather have the cash, I imagine."

Abruptly the blurred figure drooped in the saddle, rocking with suppressed laughter. Dale patted the horse, talking to it softly and waited, wondering what was so funny about it.

"Oh, boy!" gasped the rider. "You sure got an imagination on you. Say, do you s'pose there's a man in the world that *wouldn't* like to have fifty thousand dollars in cash? Gosh! They needn't be half baked and live out in the hills to get that craving. You talk like it was fifty cents. Don't they realize the worth of money *at all* in Chicago?"

"Maybe not, the way you mean. Fifty thousand is a lot of money, of course; I know that," Dale retorted stiffly. "But it isn't so much when you're investing it in land and cattle."

"W-ell, no. But you can buy miles of land with that much money."

"I could have, you mean," Dale corrected him coldly. "You forget I was robbed."

"Yeah, that's right. Darn shame, ain't it? I might of rigged up some kinda deal with you, myself." He spat gravely on the burning end of his cigarette stub and flipped it away. "I've got a few head of cattle—" He glanced toward the house as footsteps sounded on the path.

"It's all right. I saw him," the man called Jack cheerfully announced, springing lightly over the rail fence beside them and taking the reins from Dale. "Thanks. Come on, Bill."

"So long," said the man Dale had talked with, and the two rode off down the valley; slowly at first, then at a gallop when they had passed the buildings. The swift clupet-clupet of their horses' hoofs came back out of the soft moonlight long after they had passed from sight.

Now that the moon was up and he could see the road, Dale walked along a trail which led up past the meadows and toward the hills, the incident of the two riders erasing the mood that had driven him out from the house and enticing him to more adventurous dreams. Who were Jack and Bill, and what was the quarrel that prevented them from mingling with the dancers? Whom had Jack gone to the house to see? Not Quin Burnett, he guessed, for the man called Bill betrayed a certain distrust of the old man. Was it Hugh? He had come out from town to-day—but

so had others, he supposed. The number of cars parked alongside the yard fence proved that. Couldn't drive to the house because it was perched on that little hill. Think of the countless unnecessary steps taken on that path up from the gate! If he had been building Dalton's house he'd have set it just back of that magnificent pine tree; not up on the peak of that bald knoll. Maybe they built the place in Indian time, though, and wanted a clear view in all directions. They certainly had it, all right.

The squawk of an automobile horn recalled him to the fact that it was long after midnight and he was sleepy. The party was breaking up, by the sounds. He'd be able to get a little sleep, maybe, and to-morrow he would be up in the land of trout and antelope and deer—a cowman's paradise, according to Burnett.

The thought thrilled him. His imagination clung to it, tried to vision that country where no automobile had ever nosed around the turns or panted up the "dug road" spoken of by Mrs. Burnett in her matter-of-fact way. He turned and strolled back to the house, traversed a porch or two and found his room at the end of one of the newer wings, and went in, striking a match as he entered the door.

Almost immediately he saw that his suit cases

had been moved from the spot where he had placed them. There was no mistaking, for he had been careful to remember their exact position as he left the room. Furthermore, when he investigated, he saw that all his baggage had been carefully searched and placed back just as carefully the way he had left it.

This time there had been no mutilation, no disturbance of his belongings, and had he not been rather painstaking in the arrangement of his things he might never have suspected. But since the affair in the hotel he had laid a little trap in the trunk. It was in the morocco-bound books that he found the betrayal. In the binding they were exactly alike, save for the hand-tooled titles on the back, but in packing the trunk he invariably placed the books in a row in the tray; first the three volumes of Shakespeare, beginning with Hamlet; then Browning, Shelley and the Kipling verse. Now Kipling topped the list and Shelley came between Shakespeare and Browning. It was very simple but it had proven effective.

So even here at Dalton's he was not to escape their prying search! And somehow the glamor of the moonlit hills vanished and a sinister note of greed crept into his consciousness of the quiet night.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"YOU'RE PACKIN' DYNAMITE!"

QUIN BURNETT, negligently leaning back against the corral fence with one boot heel hooked over the lowest rail, straightened himself and shot a keen glance from under his black eyebrows at Dale.

"Why didn't you tell me last night?" he demanded sharply.

"Well, for one thing, I didn't have much of a chance, Mr. Burnett. You'd gone to bed, I think, when I discovered it, and there was nothing to be gained by spreading the news. It had been done so very carefully I thought it best not to let it be known I was wise to the attempt."

"Then they didn't get it?" One could almost see Burnett's nerves relax.

Dale looked at him, hesitated and shook his head.

"No," he said with deliberate calm, "they didn't get it."

"You've got it with you yet—fifty thousand dollars in cash?"

"Yes, I've got it with me." He studied Burnett's

face and its lines that seemed to deepen while he watched.

"Some one at Dalton's," Quin said under his breath, and paused as if he were taking a mental survey of the crowd there last night. "Wasn't a man there I don't know—" He broke off abruptly. "You had the money on you, then, if they went through your things and didn't get it. Mr. Emery, do you realize your life ain't safe, carrying a fortune like that around with you?"

"I think it's safe enough, Mr. Burnett, with me taking care of it."

"It wasn't so awful safe that night in the hotel," Burnett retorted. "Doc Merrill told me himself it was just bull-headed luck that you ever woke up at all." He kicked impatiently at a gray rock handy to his toe. "Why don't you put it in the bank?" he demanded pettishly. "There ain't any sense in packin' it around with you, specially now you know somebody's after it. If I was in office, young man, I'd say you was guilty of criminal carelessness, havin' all that money in your possession."

"Well, I started out with it, and I'm going through with it," Dale argued. "If they keep on snooping around, they're bound to give themselves away in time. And whatever the risk is, I'm taking it myself—"

"You don't have to carry a fortune in cash. It's plumb foolishness, and worse. And there's another side to it. You're temptin' men to crime; men that maybe would go straight if they didn't have that money shook under their noses almost, just darin' 'em to get it. I don't think you rich fellows realize what fifty thousand dollars means to a poor man that's probably up to his eyebrows in debt and wonderin' how he's goin' to wiggle out. Things have been goin' pretty tough on the range, these last few years. Men that used to have plenty are just hangin' on by the skin of their teeth. Half that money, or a quarter, would put 'em on their feet again. There's men in this country that ain't thieves at heart, that would maybe weaken if they saw the chance—"

"Not so much of a chance, if you stop to think," Dale interrupted. "The numbers of those bills have been published, remember. If a man did get hold of them, he couldn't use them without getting caught. That ought to encourage honesty, don't you think?"

"It didn't discourage somebody from goin' through your grips, did it?" The cloud settled again on Burnett's face. "In town there, I could understand a burglary bein' pulled off," he muttered. "But down at Dalton's—I wonder if somebody trailed us out from town?"

"If he did, he knew just what room I had, and that's going some in that dizzy domicile of Dalton's."

Burnett looked at him strangely and left the fence, walking slowly toward the house, Dale beside him.

"You better hit for Cheyenne and get that money into the bank," he said with more vehemence than one would have believed his easy drawl was capable of expressing. "It ain't likely they'll come on to the ranch here after you—not while I'm around—but you ain't safe off it, and I'm tellin' you straight I can't answer for what might happen."

"You might steer me to somebody with a good ranch and some cattle that I could buy," Dale suggested. "I could get rid of the money then, just as I planned to do when I took it from the bank."

"There's no place up here that I could advise you to buy," Burnett declared, not looking at Dale while he spoke.

"I thought you said it was the best range country—"

"The country's all right," Burnett hastily assured him. "I ain't talking about that. But I may as well tell you, Mr. Emery, I wouldn't want to see any stranger come in here and settle. It's all

rough country up back of here—a—well, it's a cow paradise all right, but it's outlaw paradise too. Used to be a regular hideout for the worst thieves and cutthroats in the country. They're pretty well cleaned out, of course, and it ain't like it used to be; but there's some left back up around Haystack Butte and on Dugout Creek. No use buying cattle when you'd only lose 'em, and if you can't run cattle there's no sense in buying a ranch. Down around Laramie there's good country. You could find a place down there."

Dale studied that remarkable statement for a minute. "You knew all that, didn't you, when you encouraged me to come up here with you from Cheyenne?"

"I offered you a job in the hayfield because you said you wanted to go to work. You didn't say a word about comin' up here to look at land. You'll say I knew you had that cash, and I did; at least I knew it wasn't stole from you. I—" the old man stopped there, hesitating, plainly ill at ease and wondering how much he dared to say "—I had some idea of bein' able to do something about helpin' you to get hold of the fellows that robbed you."

"I'd appreciate some help, Mr. Burnett. But is there any reason now why you can't? And, by the way, two fellows rode up to the gate last night

to see some man at the dance. Some one who had just come out from town, I heard them say. They were darn anxious not to be seen—Jack and Bill, they called themselves. Have you any idea who they were and what they wanted?"

"Jack and Bill?" Burnett stopped short in the path, then went on slowly. "Some one that had just come out—why didn't you tell me before?" He turned bleak eyes on Dale. "You better get right back to town and put that money in the bank where it belongs," he urged abruptly. "You're packin' dynamite, young man; packin' dynamite."

"Supper's ready, Father." It was the other daughter who had stayed home from the dance to have the house shining for her sister, who appeared suddenly on the vine-shaded porch. She sent a swift, reproachful glance at Dale and slid her slim, tanned arms around her father's neck as he lifted his foot to the bottom step. "You're tired, aren't you? I can always tell, because you never let anything worry you except when you're tired and hungry." Her voice dropped to a discreet undertone. "I heard you, John Quincy Burnett, and it just makes me glad I went fishing to-day. A trout feed awaits you, my dear Job, and you won't be half so alarmed over Mr. Emery's embarrassment of riches when you're through

with your supper. Town always does something to you I don't like," she finished gravely, pinching each cheek as she let him go.

"Quit it, Cynthy!" But his face brightened and as they went in together, his arm lay caressingly upon her shoulders.

So this was what she was like, Dale thought, as he followed them. He had seen her only long enough to be introduced when he arrived, Donna monopolizing her attention immediately afterward. He had formed but a hazy impression of a tall, slim girl with long hair that seemed to have a natural wave in it, and the thin, high-bred features of her father. Not a particularly pretty girl, quiet and unobtrusive in her manner, just as one would expect a mother's helper to be. Where Donna laughed and chattered, Cynthy listened and smiled. But now he began to suspect her of a quaint humor and a keen mind that could busy itself with things other than her own little personal affairs. And she liked fishing well enough to go out and catch enough for a trout feed! Probably she knew how to fry them too; Dale hoped so, and in that pleasing anticipation he forgot to speculate further concerning the girl herself.

But Cynthy calmly projected herself into his consciousness later that evening, when he had strolled down to the creek to smoke and see for

himself what the chances were for a bit of fly casting at sunrise. She must have seen him leave the house and marked the direction he took, for she came walking through the high grass of the aspen grove that bordered the stream and she made no pretense of surprise when she came up beside him as he stood contemplating a likely looking pool.

"I took four of those largest ones we had for supper from this pool," she said. "If you want to fish, I'll find you a rod to-morrow, unless you brought one with you."

"I've got a dandy," he told her. "Wyoming trout streams are famous, you know, and I came prepared. What flies are best, out here? Or don't you use flies?"

"Always, except early in the morning, and sometimes in late summer I use grasshoppers. Of course the coachman is always good, and there're times when they like a miller or a bluebottle. But our fish are really not a bit finicky; they'll rise to anything, almost. You can come out at sunrise, whip the stream for a mile and go in with a full creel almost any morning. Father keeps our streams well stocked," she added. "A friend of ours has a hatchery down near Laramie and we can get all we want." She made a perceptible pause there, but went on before Dale spoke.

"I came out to talk about Father. He tries to hide it, but he's terribly worried about something. Is it that money of yours?"

Dale half turned, looking down at her astonished until he remembered that Donna had probably told her all about his experience at the hotel. But surely Donna didn't know the whole truth.

"That money of mine doesn't worry me," he said coolly, "and why should it worry him?"

"That, of course, is evading my question, and I wish you wouldn't. I know it sounds frightfully crude to talk about your money, and I realize that it simply isn't done in your crowd. But Father is more upset than I've seen him for a long time, and I heard him tell you to go in and put your money in a bank. He's quite right. Why don't you do it?" She drew her straight dark brows together in a little frown. "For that matter," she added, "I can't understand why, if you had so much cash, you failed to profit by your experience and deposit it in the bank before you left town. You see," she added, with a little grimace, "your money is becoming the topic of the day."

"Every one seems to take it for granted that I didn't put it in the bank," he said almost pettishly. "One would think—"

"But did you?"

He eyed her calculatingly through his half-

closed lids and she stared back at him calmly, unembarrassed by his open scrutiny.

"Would it be a public calamity if I hadn't?"

"Well, yes, I think it would. I'm sure that's the attitude Father takes, and he's seldom wrong. Father was sheriff for a good many years—ten, to be exact—and he always has said that half the crimes could be prevented if people would use even ordinary common sense in not putting temptation in the way of people who are weak. So if you really have a lot of money—I mean, if you really are carrying it with you in cash —half the blame will be yours if somebody steals it. And it seems so unnecessary; so foolish."

"Yes, I grant you it's all of that—or it was in the beginning. I needn't have taken it from the bank in the first place, of course. A hard-shell old banker razzed me into it, really. And I never dreamed—I can't see for the life of me how the news got out. It was safe enough so long as no one knew I had it, and I wanted to get old Kittridge's goat. Somebody spilled the beans, though —and that's the big mystery to me. Only three men besides myself knew anything about it, and I'm dead certain none of them would let it slip. But it did slip, somehow, and that's where the plot thickens. They've tried twice now—"

"Twice? Donna only told me about the time they chloroformed you."

"Well, this is a secret, Miss Burnett. I told your father, but no one else knows about it except, of course, the guilty party. Some one went through my stuff last night at Dalton's some time between supper and when I went to bed."

"Dalton's?" She caught her breath. "What did Father say?"

"Not much. It kind of knocked him for a goal. That's when you overheard him telling me I was carrying dynamite."

Cynthy sat back against a sloping rock, bracing her slippered feet and staring up at him, wholly unconscious of the picture she made in her light dress, a dark glossy braid falling over her shoulder.

"He's perfectly right," she said. "You are." She shivered. "Oh, can't you *see* what you're doing?"

"Yes," he answered with a sudden hardening of the muscles on his jaw. "I'm standing pat, by thunder!"

"You're playing the fool, that's what you're doing. You ought to be jailed yourself if anything happens. You're just *daring* some one to commit a crime!"

"That," he said with his strange, shut-eyed,

defiant smile, "is rather an original point of view, isn't it?"

"Maybe it is," she assented, smiling a little but shaking her head immediately afterward. "There in town I can see that you were justified in thinking your money and yourself perfectly safe, even though you had done a terribly reckless thing. You had every reason to believe that nobody knew. But when you bumped into the fact that some one did know, the thing you should have done was to take the money straight to the bank. Any bank. I'm not plugging for the Stockgrowers' Trust, just because the cashier's my brother-in-law; any bank would be safe."

"Mowerby, you mean? I didn't know he was any relation to you folks." Because he refused to accept her point of view Dale's mind fixed upon the unimportant detail.

"Jim married my sister Rose. We've always known the Mowerby boys. Their ranch is just seven miles above here, at the head of Dugout Creek. But that," she returned to the charge, "has nothing to do with the way you dangle fifty thousand dollars in front of people and dare them to steal it. It's enough to—to get you murdered!" she cried in a surge of feeling.

"Oh, come! Let's not get ourselves all excited over it," he protested, laughing down at her.

"The money's safe enough; I'm willing to guarantee that. Tell me about fishing and let me show you my book of flies. Made most of 'em myself, and I brought enough stuff to keep me in flies for the next ten years. I'll teach you how to make them if you don't know. You ought to be an artist at it, with those slim little fingers."

Cynthy sighed, gave a sudden ironical laugh and got up from the rock.

"These slim little fingers do better work in the dishpan," she said shortly. "Well, come on, then. You're the most stubborn man I ever saw, Mr. Emery. You're what is popularly called bull-headed. I've said my say, and on your own head be it if you find yourself in a jam over that darned money of yours."

"Okay, Miss Burnett. Shall we let it ride that way?" The smiling look he gave her brought a faint flush to her cheeks.

"Well, all right, but you'll see," she said somewhat ambiguously. "Oh, there comes Hugh and the boys! Now we can have some music. Hugh's got the most wonderful, rich tenor—we have pretty fine concerts when Donna's home to play. Do you sing, Mr. Emery?"

"Oh, I wail a few heart-breaking yowls under certain conditions," he grinned. "Looks like the flies will have to wait."

CHAPTER EIGHT

DALE GOES FISHING

Four riders, with Hugh Mowerby in the lead, were whooping into the yard. Donna had run out to greet them and Hugh spurred toward her and flipped his loop over her shoulders just as Dale and Cynthy reached the end of the porch.

"I always told you I'd get my loop on you some day," Hugh shouted triumphantly, while the others laughed uproariously.

"And I told you I'd slip any loop you could throw," Donna retorted, as she threw off the rope. "Pile your loop on the Chicago maverick, why don't you?"

"No use. He's broke a'ready," laughed Hugh, giving Dale a wink as he dismounted. "H'lo, Cynth, got any pie at your house?"

"If I have it won't last long. You boys light down on baking day like grasshoppers in a wheat field. You met these fellows at Dalton's, didn't you, Mr. Emery? No, you didn't meet Ned, I know," she corrected herself. "He didn't go to the dance. This is Ned Brown, Mr. Emery."

"And make it Dale, everybody," Dale urged, as he shook hands with a slight young fellow with worried brown eyes and a pursed, babyish mouth. "I don't want you folks to go on mistering me; I'm not used to it."

"That's the stuff! I knew you must be regular folks, but we've been calling you Chicago behind your back." Hugh clapped a big hand down on Dale's shoulder. "Don't mind, do you?"

"Afraid I'm not tough enough to live up to it. When did you fellows come into the hills? We didn't see anything of you on the road."

"No, I don't reckon you did. The moon was up and we came on home last night after the dance. Hello, Quin!"

Quin Burnett, standing just within the porch, nodded unsmilingly to the four. Presently he went off to the stables and the group shifted to the house and the old upright piano. Mrs. Burnett lighted an old-fashioned hanging lamp over the center table, brought another with a flowered white shade and set it on the piano, warned them not to knock it off and set the house afire, and went out to sit in a rocker on the porch and listen to the music with a heavy shawl wrapped around her to keep out the evening chill.

For the first time since he had left Chicago

Dale began to feel at home in his strange surroundings. There was no aloofness here to-night, no constraint nor any shadow of suspicion or dislike, as there had been at Dalton's. Up here on Bear Creek he felt a wholly different atmosphere; at least, he did when he stopped to think about it at all, which was not often and never for longer than a minute or two at a time.

Apparently this was meant as an informal welcome to Donna who had been away in Denver all winter. The boys insisted that she must tell them all about school, after which they told all that had happened up on Dugout; then there were new and senseless songs to try out. When they found that Dale knew them all and could give very fair cabaret interpretations while he sang, they swept him joyously into the middle of things. The boys boldly addressed him as "Chicago", but Donna and Cynthy tentatively began to call him Dale and to scold him impartially with the others.

Quin Burnett came to the door and looked in upon them with a sober, meditative stare, and Neal Somers came up from the bunkhouse and joined his raucous voice to the general clamor. Judy, the fat old squaw who officiated in the kitchen, waddled in and sat broadly smiling in a corner, tapping her moccasined feet to the music

when the singers paused for lack of breath and Donna rattled off a jazz tune.

Eventually the squaw and Cynthy brought in three big custard pies, thick and quivery, and Dale gleefully learned how to balance a generous triangle on his palm and diminish its size rapidly with large ecstatic bites as the other fellows did. When Hugh loudly declared that pie tasted a lot better when you could eat it from your hand, Dale earnestly agreed with him.

"Come up and stay with us awhile, Chicago," Hugh invited, when the moon was rising at last, and the four were mounting their horses in front of the porch. "That is, if Quin can get along without you for awhile. The fishin's fine and the deer season will be open in a couple of weeks, and I can show you the best hunting on earth up on Dugout."

"Dugout—that's outlaw country up in there, isn't it?" Dale was gently stroking the neck of Hugh's horse, which seemed disposed to nose him in friendly fashion.

"Outlaw? Well, yes, it was kinda that way a few years back, but she's tamed down considerable now. Away down toward the mouth of Dugout it's pretty rough country, and over beyond in a place they call Hungry Hollow. Wild bunch used to slip over the line from Nebraska and

hang out in there. We used to lose stock now and then, and we lose a little now too, but it's tame enough; nothin' to be afraid of."

"I'll try and find nerve enough to ride up there then," Dale said with some sarcasm. "What's that old saying about not getting blood out of a turnip? I'll wear a sign to the effect that Cheyenne got the first whack at me. I ought to be fairly safe, don't you think?"

"Sure ought to," Hugh grinned. "Try us a whirl, anyway." He gathered up the reins to go. " 'By, girls. Put Chicago on a gentle horse and bring him up sometime. We ought to take him up and show him Yellow Peak at sundown. We might make a day of it, if Jim and Rose come out the Fourth. Picnic—that sort of thing."

The girls declared that it was a great idea, but Dale fancied that their enthusiasm was neither great nor lasting, and that they were merely being nice to their guests who lingered for no reason at all except that they hated to end a pleasant evening. Dale wished they would go and be done with it. The keen, clear air was making him intolerably sleepy, and he wanted to wake at sunrise and get out with his rod and whip those pools for the trout Cynthy solemnly assured him would jump clear out of the water to strike at his fly. He

liked these boys, but he wished they would go on home so he could get some sleep.

But even that interminable interval of delaying their departure ended and the four from Dugout Creek went loping away in the moonlight, singing as they rode,

"There's a rose that grows in No Man's Laand—"

with Hugh Mowerby's clear tenor holding the last note in wistful cadence.

Tired as he was, Dale thrilled to the plaintive voices blending together in muted harmony as the words blurred and grew fainter in the distance. The hills and the quiet moon swimming across the purple star-sprinkled sky to the rugged bank of clouds, the measured hoof-beats of galloping horses and men's voices singing in the night—through all that happened afterwards Dale never forgot that moment.

"Oh, boy, but I'm sleepy!" Donna grumbled, shattering the magic of the night with that prosaic statement.

"I don't think there'll be any fishing excursions at sunrise," Cynthy remarked, stifling a yawn as she glanced at Dale, staring up at the moon.

"You get that Minnehaha person up in time

to clean 'em when I get in and you'll have trout to fry for breakfast," Dale retorted. "I'd be out now if I thought it'd be any use. It's a crime to sleep through a night like this."

"Well, I'm what Dad calls a habitual criminal," Donna declared pertly. "All winter long I had to get up at six-thirty or miss my breakfast. Good-night—see you at lunch, maybe."

It was a stupid finish to a perfect evening, Dale thought, as he unpacked his trunk and got out his fishing paraphernalia; his pet rod, his book of flies and leaders, the expensive automatic reel and new silk line, his boots and corduroy breeches. Even at that ungodly hour he could not resist a moment spent in rapt contemplation of his flies, of which he was inordinately proud.

He thought so little of Cynthy's arguments and urgent warning that he went straight to sleep and dreamed of whipping the riffles of swift mountain streams, and he was engaged in a soul-stirring tussle with a two-pounder when the shrill cachinnation of a coyote down in the aspen grove by the creek woke him just before dawn. It was still so dark in his room that he could barely see to dress and gather up his tackle and collapsible creel.

The coyote was still yapping in the grove when he stole from the house and he caught a fleeting glimpse of its gray, ghostly form slinking away

from him as he made straight for the creek. The moon was just slipping out of sight behind the hills and since the water lay black in the shadows of the grove he went on upstream, stumbling occasionally over weed-grown rocks and pushing his way through thickets of wild cherry and plum, halting now and then to listen to the abrupt clashing of bushes as some animal rushed away startled by his approach; cattle, his common sense told him, but the spirit of adventure within him insisted that it might be a bear.

When the light grew strong enough to show him the hurrying ripples and the brown mirror of pools, he sat down upon a fallen aspen tree and leisurely chose the sturdiest tip for his rod (having fresh in his mind the remembrance of that hard-fought battle of his dream) and tested joints and leader. He had no idea how far he had come. Certainly there was nothing recognizable in his surroundings, and no sound of ranch life, not even the faint crowing of the roosters, came to him where he sat in a little rocky glade ringed round with brushy ridges. Others must have been here many a time, but he closed his mind to that certainty and enjoyed to the full the fancy that he had discovered the spot. Up beyond a rocky point the stream was murmuring loudly among rocks and he heeded the call. There might be a

big one up there, he thought. He could go to the rapids and fish downstream to the ranch, and still be in time for that trout breakfast he had promised Cynthy.

The distance was greater than he had guessed it, and the murmur developed into a steady surge of sound when finally he stopped and selected a fly for the first cast. He was just below a miniature waterfall perfect in its setting of huge boulders and dripping ferns, and for a space he stood gazing, forgetting to cast. He wondered why Cynthy had not spoken of this beauty spot; but then he remembered that she had known it all her life and probably took it for granted, knowing he would discover it eventually. But one thing he knew in that moment: If this particular section of Wyoming could show him many more streams such as this, here was where he would find himself a ranch, outlaws or no outlaws. Anyway, he didn't believe Quin Burnett's statement—or at least he took it with the famous grain of salt. Hugh certainly knew as much about it as Burnett, and he didn't make such a wild yarn of it.

At that point he drew back his rod, glanced to see that it would clear all obstructions and snapped it into action. The reel clicked faintly to the cast and the fly flicked the white-tipped waves just on the edge of the boiling rock caul-

dron where the water came down in a clean, beautiful fall of thirty feet or more.

Instantly a slatey streak left the water and the reel sang as a big trout struck and scooted straight up into the turbulence under the fall. A thrill of exultation shot through Dale's nerves. The fight was on.

Ten minutes of expert playing him, anticipating every rush, sensitive fingers catching the significance of each premonitory slackening of the line, body tensed in the intoxication of the battle. Absorbed, completely lost to everything save the landing of the gamiest trout he had ever had on his line, time and his surroundings were obliterated alike from Dale's consciousness. The world had abruptly narrowed to the rock-bound waterfall and the seething pool beneath it; life was compressed into the landing of that one fourteen-inch trout safely upon the bank.

The smothering folds of a heavy blanket flung over his head and shoulders from behind had the paralyzing effect of a sudden extinguishment of thought. He did not even think to cry out or to struggle, as rod and reel were snatched from his hands and he was tripped and brought violently to the ground.

Some one sat upon him, twisting the blanket tightly around his middle so that he could not

free his hands. While he kicked aimlessly in futile panic, some one else began pulling off his fishing boots. And through it all no one spoke a word. The silence was deadly, menacing, as baffling to the victim as the stifling folds of the tightly wrapped blanket.

CHAPTER NINE

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

LIKE a wildcat in a bag Dale struggled and fought, but that first minute of dazed inaction placed him at a disadvantage, for it gave his assailants time to draw the blanket tight. Hands were tugging and twitching and pulling at his clothes, but though he found voice enough to swear and threaten he got no word of reply. He was fighting blindly against hands, knees and steel-muscled arms. The blanket was shifted until it seemed meant to throttle him, so tightly was it pulled around his neck. Then it was drawn down again around his body, his arms forced inside, and the blanket ends snugly tied.

After that, one sat on him again while he heard some one moving cautiously among the rocks. In the midst of his rage and helplessness it occurred to him that it would be impossible to track anybody away from the spot, that thought coming when he heard the sound of stealthy, receding footsteps. The burly individual seated upon Dale's middle waited for a time—how long

Dale could not tell, though it seemed at least an hour—and then, absolutely without any warning save an investigative jerking at the blanket knots, heaved himself up and fled.

Simple as had been the method used to hold him captive, it took Dale five minutes to get at the knots, untie them and free himself of the blanket. By that time the running footsteps had ceased and the place was as serene as he had found it half an hour before, the only sound the churning roar of the falls.

Dale got up, stepped off the rough cobbles to a smooth rock more comfortable for his bare feet and stared around him. The trout he had been meticulously tiring out must have been yanked ashore in one heave as the rod was snatched from him, for it lay feebly thrashing its tail in a crevice between two rocks. But the rod was nowhere to be seen. His clothes were gone, even to his hat, which he remembered had been pulled from his head by a hand reaching up under the blanket while he struggled. He stood there on the flat rock naked, the rising sun shining into his wrathful eyes, a brown army blanket tumbled at his feet.

After a minute of staring around him, he picked up the blanket, shook it vigorously, wrapped it around him and leaving the trout where it lay, started back downstream. There was

nothing else to do. However much he might want to start hotly off in pursuit of his mysterious assailants, he could not take up the trail without clothes or a weapon of any kind. So he went nipping carefully over the rocks where before he had walked heedless of rose briars, sticks and sharp stones that now impeded his progress and hurt him cruelly. Coming up, he had rejoiced in the wildness; now he wished there was a trail, and the broader and smoother it was, the better he would have liked it.

He hoped to reach the ranch before any one was up, but he could not travel very fast and so, slipping like a thief into his room, he confronted Cynthy who had finished making his bed and was tackling the job of picking up his belongings which he had scattered over the floor and on chairs when he got out his fishing tackle at midnight. She started, turned and stared with astonishment when he appeared suddenly in the doorway clutching the blanket around him, little trickles of blood sliding down the scratches on his calves.

"For heavens' sake!" Cynthy gasped, maidenly embarrassment submerged in her amazement. "What have you been doing to yourself? You didn't fall into the creek, did you?"

Walking on the side of his feet, Dale went

mincing over to the nearest chair and sat down, pulling the blanket over his knees.

"If you've got a pin or a needle handy, I'd like to take a million thorns out of my feet," he said stiffly.

"Here's a needle—but what *have* you been doing to yourself, Mr. Emery? I thought you'd gone fishing." Cynthy's eyes were wide and questioning, but her mouth looked ready to break into laughter.

Dale frowned. He had not meant to say anything at all about the attack. He had wanted to wait and see who first betrayed himself by seeming conscious of his misadventure. But here was Cynthy with that terribly keen and direct mind of hers demanding the truth.

"I did go fishing," he said grimly. "I told you I was going—you and Donna. Did you tell any one what I intended to do this morning?"

The irrepressible smile was swept away from her lips.

"Did I tell any one? What do you mean?"

"I mean, did you tell any one I was going to get up early this morning and go fishing?" The absurdity of his appearance could not lessen the gravity of his manner and Cynthy apparently realized it. She sat down abruptly on the bed facing him.

"Why, no, I didn't tell any one—no one except Donna, and you were talking to her yourself about it, last night. Why? What happened?"

"Somebody was laying for me, up at those falls," he told her without preface. "They must have read my mind, or else they followed me. I was busy landing my first fish when they—piled in." His face reddened at the realization of just how ridiculous it was going to sound.

"They? But *who?*" Cynthy caught her breath, setting her teeth sharply into her lower lip. "Were they—did you know them?"

"They were mighty careful I shouldn't," he said harshly. "They threw this blanket over my head and kept me bundled in it while they—took my clothes. Even my fishing tackle."

"Oh!" Cynthy will not be whiter in her coffin than she looked then. "What—did—they say?" The words came in gulps, forced out by sheer will power.

"Not a thing. Never opened their mouths." He eyed her strangely. "It was that damned money, of course. They went through my stuff at Dalton's and decided I must carry it with me, I suppose. They weren't overlooking any bets this time. They even took my socks."

"And you—they didn't—"

"No," he said, deliberately brutal, "I'm afraid I must disappoint you again. They didn't get it. Do you hear? *They didn't get one damn cent!*" He watched her recoil a little from his tone, and relented. "You'd have said it served me right. But they lost out; unless the clothes fit," he added sardonically.

Cynthy was sitting there white-faced, staring straight before her. She did not seem to have heard his last rather fatuous remark.

"I'll have to hand it to them for mind readers," he went on, eyeing her curiously. "You say you didn't tell any one—"

Her glance shifted to his face, dwelt there as if her thoughts were trying to focus themselves upon what he was saying.

"I? No—no, I'm sure I didn't tell any one. You planned it down at the creek, and the boys rode up just as we were coming back." She seemed to be thinking aloud, to be piecing together what had taken place. "They were singing and carrying on all the while they were here, don't you remember? No one spoke of fishing—did they?"

"No, that's right," Dale assented. "The subject wasn't mentioned. Not until—"

"Until the boys had gone and we were talking about getting up in the morning. We were alone

—Donna and you and myself—" She stopped short, looking quickly away from him. "Yes," she repeated steadily, "we three were alone. I remember distinctly."

Dale did not say anything, for he too remembered distinctly. He remembered that Quin Burnett had crossed the room while they were talking by the piano, going into the bedroom where his wife was already asleep, as her audible breathing attested.

"They were mighty careful not to hurt me," he said, for no particular reason except that he did not like her silence. When she did not answer that, he tried again. "I expect the crooks have been right on my trail ever since I left Cheyenne; at Dalton's they tried it, and when they didn't get what they were after, they followed me on up here. Of course, if they were hiding somewhere, watching the house—say, what's the matter with some one being hidden in the grove last evening and hearing what we said? Then they'd simply watch to see which way I went this morning, and trail me. That must be the solution of the mystery. Don't you think so?"

Cynthy gave a long sigh and stood up. "Yes, I think that must be the way it happened," she said, looking him straight in the eyes. "I hear Judy stirring the pancake batter, and that means

breakfast in ten minutes. I—maybe we'd better not say anything to any one yet, until we—"

"Sure, we'll have to talk it over first," Dale told her readily; almost too readily for her peace of mind, if Cynthy were sufficiently alert to read signs just then. "Don't wait breakfast for me if I'm not there—just let them think I'm not up."

She looked at him and nodded, her eyes troubled as she went out on to the porch and into the kitchen through the back way; and Dale, profanely exploring the bruised soles of his feet for briars, heard her talking to the squaw. Quin Burnett came up from the stables, Neal Somers following, and Dale heard them washing their hands in the big white enamel basin on the kitchen porch. He paused in his first-aid surgery and listened, frowning thoughtfully at the blank wall behind the bed. Had there been more than two men? He had thought so, but still it might be—

He pushed the thought from him, but it returned persistently. There was no getting away from it, Quin Burnett had walked through the living room while he had been boasting that he would have a mess of trout for breakfast. He had seemed preoccupied and apparently had not given them any attention, but that did not mean

Quin could not have heard. Had there been more than two men? It had all happened so quickly, and with his head in the blanket and fighting to free himself he could not tell.

Quin looked up at him with some surprise when Dale presented himself at the breakfast table a few minutes later. Neal Somers, pouring syrup generously over his second helping of hot-cakes, also sent him a quick glance that might have meant much or little—one would have to see into his mind to know for certain.

"Thought I heard you say something about goin' fishin' this morning," Quin observed, in his soft drawl. "What's the matter? Didn't wake up in time?"

"I told him he wouldn't," Cynthy put in quickly. "We were up too late last night, I guess. Did we keep you awake, Mother?"

"No, dunno as you did. What time did the boys leave? I thought they was going to make a night of it, the way they hung on."

"You can have pretty fair luck fishin' any time of day up here," Quin returned to the subject. "There's a place about a mile above here where there's quite a hefty falls, for a little creek. Sometimes you can haul 'em outa there as fast as you can bait your hook."

"You see, Father doesn't believe in fly cast-

ing," Cynthy smiled bravely across at Dale. "I bet he even uses a bent pin half the time; and I know he digs worms for bait."

"Well, and I bring in the fish too, you notice. Better have the girls take you up to the falls, Dale. If it don't turn off too hot, you oughta be able to have pretty good sport up there."

Dale's eyes turned to Cynthy, caught her startled look, and glanced away with an odd sensation of guilt. It did not seem fair to surprise the betrayal in her face.

"Does that mean I'm fired from the hay meadow?" he asked lightly. "I've been wondering about my exact status here. After what you said yesterday, I wasn't sure whether you wanted me or not."

"You can work if you want to," Quin said indifferently. "If you don't, you're welcome to stay anyhow—if the women folks don't kick."

"I'm sure he's welcome to stay, far as I'm concerned," Mrs. Burnett added her apathetic welcome. "Cynthy does most of the cookin'; and I guess one more or less don't matter. We always have folks comin' and goin'."

"The hay crew lives down in the old house," Quin went on in a desultory tone, though it was not his habit to be garrulous. "Handier to the hay field and makes it easier on the women folks.

Looks like we're goin' to have quite a crop of hay this year; more'n we had last summer or the year before that."

Dale was not interested in hay crops just then. What he wanted to know was Quin Burnett's reason for mentioning fishing up at the falls, and why Cynthy had given him that scared look. Did she know or suspect more than she would acknowledge? It certainly looked like it.

He tried to study Burnett, to form some definite conclusion about the old man. He thought he could detect a hidden constraint, an awareness of some near trouble which he would not admit, and he was positive that Burnett was clinging to the subject of weather and grass growth merely for the purpose of avoiding a silence or, what would be worse, some remark that might precipitate a discussion best left alone. For the rest, Dale still admired Burnett. He was a handsome old man with the head and brow of a thinker, the kind, clear eyes of a soul sweet and loyal to its traditions and a mouth and jaw which showed lines of strength, even of a certain grim inflexibility.

That same strength revealed itself in a softer degree in Cynthy, and the same intellectual look lay across her forehead. Didn't it mean anything in either? Was it just a trick of bony structure

and facial muscles, after all? Dale wondered, glancing as often as he dared from one to the other. Cynthy *was* upset; scared, if one wanted to put it bluntly. And just as surely as she unconsciously revealed her fear, her father betrayed the fact that he was worried.

Even Neal Somers seemed ill at ease and watchful, keeping his eyes for the most part turned toward his plate, with little sly glances from under his eyebrows. He looked oftener at Quin than at any one else, Dale thought, as if he were curious about something. The only person at the table who seemed thoroughly satisfied was Mrs. Burnett, who radiated a smug contentment with her own home after her experience with hotels and restaurants. Especially did she dilate upon the thick yellow cream, the eggs and the butter, and the fact that her own feather bed was like heaven after them hotel mattresses. She'd just as soon sleep on the soft side of a board as in a hotel bed, she confided to her family. Mrs. Burnett, Dale decided with an inward smile, was one person who could safely be eliminated from his list of suspects.

CHAPTER TEN

"I HOPE THEY GET IT!"

"WELL," said Cynthy, stopping beside the creek and glancing rather helplessly around her, "what have you decided to do about it? Shall we look along here for some sign of them, or just what do you want to do?" She pulled a full-blown wild rose from its stem beside her and began absently nibbling the petals. "What you ought to do," she added, "is have Father take you back to town with that money, and put it in the bank."

"And be waylaid and robbed on the way in?"

"Oh, there wouldn't be much danger of that with Father along. I don't think you'd be bothered at all. And besides, if you started off on horseback as if you were just going to ride around and look at the country, you'd probably be able to get to Dalton's where the car is before any one knew you were going. Father knows all the short cut trails and it really isn't so very far. Not more than nine miles."

"If I was watched last night," said Dale stubbornly, "I'll be watched to-day. They know they didn't get what they're after and they'll keep on my trail; I'm sure of that."

"And you seem to think it's great sport!" she cried exasperatedly. "You act as if it's just a game!"

"Hide and seek," he nodded, just to tease her. Make her mad enough and she'd say just what she thought, maybe. "It isn't exactly what I planned for the summer, I admit, but it's a great pastime; sport, as you say."

"It's a fool's sport," she exclaimed, her eyes flashing. "If it weren't for the trouble you're bringing to—to others, I'd never lift a finger to save you or your silly money. You must be crazy, or more stupid even than you act, if you can't see what you're doing."

"Stupid, I expect," he assented equably. "Well, here's about where we were standing when we held that historic conversation about the proper time and method of catching trout from your delightful stream. If you'll stand here, Cynthy, and repeat from memory what you said last night, in about the same tone of voice you used then, I'll walk off as far as I can hear you distinctly. Then I'll mark the spot and come back and let you go off and listen to me. Granting then that the

crooks have hearing as keen as ours, that will give us our field—"

"You're simply trying to make a fool of me!" Cynthy accused him, her voice low and tense, her body quivering a little with the emotion she was holding rigidly under control.

"Oh, no! We agreed, didn't we, that some one must have been listening to us last night? It's either that, or—" he waited until her lips parted for speech "—either that or mind-reading, and we don't either of us take that seriously. At least I don't, even granting my inherent stupidity."

"I didn't say you *are* stupid, I said you *act* stupid."

"Well, I won't quibble over words. What else can I believe, if no one spied on us last night? You wouldn't ask me to believe it was just a coincidence, their being at the falls within ten minutes after I arrived? Some one certainly knew I intended to get out at daybreak and followed me. And how would they know, if they didn't hear me say something about it?"

Cynthy did not answer that. She was staring at the water, her lips pressed together, her eyes blinking a little as if she were afraid she might cry.

"Well, I'm going up to the falls," Dale said with a certain ruthless note of the man-hunter

in his voice. "This thing has gone pretty far, you know. They got away with all the clothes I had on and a rod and reel that set me back a hundred bucks and more. Why they wanted my book of flies I don't know, but I'm certainly going to make it my business now to run this thing down. I may be a fool already, but they aren't going to razz me all over the country and make a monkey of me without some come-back."

"Why do you want to go back up there?" she demurred, her straight brows pulled together, as she glanced up in his face. "Of course they're gone long ago."

"They might leave some sign, though. I used to be a pretty nifty boy scout and I think I can still trail pretty well." He looked at her irresolutely. "Maybe you'd better stay here. I might want to hike around quite a bit."

Her answer to that was a firmer pressure of her lips as she stepped to one side and started off upstream, walking with a quick, purposeful stride which left no doubt of her destination. Dale grinned to himself as he followed her, fully expecting to take the lead as soon as he caught up. But Cynthy kept well in advance of him and never once looked back or answered when he spoke: As a hiker she set a pace it winded him to follow, but she probably had the altitude to help

her in that and moreover she had all her life been accustomed to walking over rough ground. But at the rocky bend of the stream she stopped and waited until he came up.

"Was it here?" she asked coldly. "This is where we usually try for the big fish; an experienced fisherman would of course recognize it as splendid water for trout."

"And a stranger would want to know what all the noise is about, up around the point. I went on to the falls," he told her, and led the way, turning once or twice to help her over the boulders until he saw that she perversely refused to see his proffered hand, when he went on by himself. So it happened that when Cynthy pushed the bushes aside at the last turn below the falls, he was standing staring down upon a heap of clothing laid on the flat rock where he had stood naked not more than two hours before.

"Well, what do you know about this?" He turned when he heard her coming and waved a hand eloquently at the pile.

"Oh, they brought your clothes back!" she exclaimed, staring rather blankly at the heap.

"Look at those boots, would you? And my trout rod, that they've ruined to make sure I didn't have any money rolled up inside. What's the big idea of bringing back the pieces? There

isn't a thing here I can use again—except maybe the reel," he added hopefully, picking it up from the top of the heap. "Why do you suppose they piled the stuff here?"

"So you wouldn't go hunting around too much," Cynthy said promptly. "It's a hint not to, I suppose. Of course, you know they had been here, and if they put the stuff here, you wouldn't try to trail them."

"Oh, wouldn't I?" Dale snorted.

"Of course, you can do as you please, but I don't see what good it will do. They're probably miles away by this time."

"I wonder!" Dale muttered, still poking and prying. "Say, there's one thing they didn't bring back, Cynthy. I had a small bill fold with some money in it, and I see that's missing."

"I suppose," said Cynthy, "that's what you went back for after you started this morning? You might better have left it in your room." She had sat down on a boulder and was gazing absently at the trout Dale had left between the rocks. Now she looked at him curiously. "Were you afraid to leave money in a room at our house?"

"I don't quite get you, Cynthy. I didn't go back after my money. It was just a force of habit, I guess, that made me slip the pocketbook into

my pocket when I changed. My knife is here, and my cigarettes—I took everything out of my other pockets and put them in these. A fellow does those things automatically. And the bill fold is gone. See? I buttoned the flap down over it, I remember, last night when I got out these breeches."

"But you went back for something," Cynthy insisted, eyeing him strangely. "I heard you step up on the porch and open the door and go in. I'm sure I did, though I was half asleep. I sort of wondered what it was you forgot. And then I heard you go tiptoeing out, and I knew it was too early to call Judy, so I dozed a little while before I got up."

"You must have heard me when I started out. I didn't go back for anything. I beat it straight down to the creek and on up here. And they jumped me right here, while I was playing that trout. I'd just begun to reel him in when the blanket went over my head—"

"But you *did* go back. I heard you when you went out first—that woke me. Donna and I have the next room, and there's only a board partition between. I just thought, 'Well, he did wake up early, after all,' and was almost asleep again when I heard you step up on the porch and come in."

"Not me," Dale denied again, shaking his head. "Must have been somebody else."

"But who in the world would?" Then she glanced at the clothes and turned a shade paler. Their mute testimony answered her.

"One thing," said Dale, rolling the ripped and cut garments up in a bundle, "whoever went into my room couldn't have been on this job up here, because he wouldn't have had time to do both. I walked right along up here, and I know it was only a few minutes—that fish jumped clear of the water to get the fly, and it was my first cast. And he was just beginning to tire—"

"I know—oh, *please* go back to Cheyenne before something happens!"

"No, I came up here to look at land and cattle and I'm not going to be bluffed out by any cheap rural crooks. That's all they are. Town yeggs wouldn't pull this kind of stuff. If they went after a bunch of money, they'd get it and no fooling."

"And so will these men," Cynthy declared unguardedly. "Do you think they'll ever stop now until they succeed? If you've got that money with you, they'll get it. Oh, you're such a fool! You have the contempt for country people that all city folks have. You think no one out here has any brains or any nerve or any determination. I haven't a doubt you even call us *yokels*—or you

would, if you happened to think of the word. But I want to warn you that you shouldn't underestimate the intelligence—"

"Oh, so you admit that this is local talent, do you?" Dale was looking at her under half-closed lids. "I thought you agreed with me that they had followed me out from town—from Chicago, for that matter. You said you did. But we're getting down to brass tacks now, it seems."

"No, we're not, unless you're ready to go and put your money in the bank. It all simmers down to that. And I never said it was local talent. You said you wouldn't be bluffed out by cheap rural crooks, and I say you're a fool if you think people out here haven't just as much intelligence as your city crooks. If it is some one—" She flung out a hand in angry dismissal. "There's no use in talking to you," she finished exasperately. "I just don't want you to make criminals of people by having that money where they can get it."

"No fear—they were made long before I got here."

"How do you know? They may be just—awfully hard up. They may think you've got more money than you know what to do with, and you wouldn't miss forty or fifty thousand."

"Now, that's a thought, Cynthy. Tell me who is hard up in this country, and I'll—"

"Nobody!" she cried hotly. "I said—for all you know, they might be. It might not be hardened criminals, but just somebody who is weak and tempted."

"I can't agree with you there." Dale shook his head. "They may be tempted, but they're not weak. I'm fairly husky myself, and I didn't have a Chinaman's chance with them."

"No, and you won't have, either," she retorted. "You're so smug and smart about it, Mr. Emery, I hope now they *do* get it; every—*damned cent!*" And with that, Cynthy turned and started home, walking swiftly and never once looking back.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"THEY'LL HAVE YOUR HIDE NEXT!"

For a minute Dale stood staring after her, his jaw sagged with the suddenness of her departure. Then he grinned a little at the very conscious recklessness of her swear word, and since fishing was out of the question, he sat down on the rock she had vacated to consider the whole affair as impartially as was possible to the one most deeply concerned.

The exact cause of her anger was not far to seek, though just at first he wondered whether it was his teasing that had upset her. But he did not think it was that, for Cynthy had seemed a pretty good sport except where this money was concerned. On that one subject she lost all sense of humor and became anxious, full of resentments and reproaches. Was it only on general principles that she was so insistent upon his getting rid of the money? Dale did not think so. He thought she must know pretty well who was after it; either that, or she must fear that some one she knew might become involved in the affair.

Was it that noble-looking old man, her father?

It still did not seem possible to Dale, and yet he knew that modern psychologists have discarded the belief that character may be read by the face. He had been taught that many of the greatest criminals are guileless in appearance, and that the stoutest liars look you square in the eye, and that every man is a potential lawbreaker. He decided that appearances should not influence him from now on, and that if the evidence continued to point to Quin Burnett, there the suspicion should rest in spite of noble looks or magnetic personality. He even extended that to Hugh Mowerby, though he had no cause to suspect Hugh, other than the fact that Hugh had been in Cheyenne and at Dalton's when the two attempts to rob him were made.

Now that Cynthy was gone he inspected his clothing more carefully. The fly book had been returned but several of his best flies were missing. They might have dropped out, or they might have been stolen—and he admitted to himself that they had probably dropped out, since the book itself had been torn apart to make sure nothing was concealed in the leather lining. Even the facing and waistband of his corduroy breeches had been ripped open and inspected. Not a double thickness of cloth anywhere had been left unexamined.

And as Dale contemplated the havoc they had wrought, his anger grew and took tangible form. No matter who they were, they couldn't get away with it. As he had told Cynthy, the thing had gone too far for him to overlook it and be content that they had failed. Whoever they were, they had pretty reliable information to go on, and they weren't disposed to give up very easily, but in the long run they must be forced to conclude that for some reason he had not brought the money with him.

Still, he had frankly declared to both Quin Burnett and Cynthy that he did have it—and if another effort was made to find it he would be forced to one conclusion. Strangers would certainly be pretty well discouraged after this last desperate attempt.

He got up and tried half-heartedly to trail the crooks and find where they had stopped to go through his clothes. It couldn't be far, he felt sure, or they would not have taken the trouble to make that ironical gesture of returning his things. But the piled rocks and outcroppings of flat ledges extended all through that neighborhood and the soreness of his feet made the rough going difficult. He soon gave up the search and taking his bundle under his arm, he returned morosely to the ranch, turning

over in his mind several different plans calculated to uncover the culprits and sourly discarding each one in turn, because his common sense told him it was impractical. Until he had more definite evidence he would only be stabbing in the dark or making a fool of himself by accusing the wrong party.

Cynthy and her father were coming slowly up from the meadow when Dale came limping out of the grove to that corner of the back porch where the door of his room opened. In the living room Donna was listlessly playing the piano and since Dale was in no mood to help her while away a dull forenoon, he was thankful for that outside door to his room. He did not want to see Cynthy either, for that matter; but he kept watching her, hoping she would not look up and discover him. She was walking alongside the big bay horse her father was riding, and the two were talking earnestly together, Cynthy holding to a stirrup to keep pace with him and looking up into Quin's face as she walked. But just as Dale lifted his foot to the porch step Quin looked at him—for all Dale knew, those shrewd blue eyes had spied him in the grove—and reined his horse that way. There was no avoiding an encounter now, if Quin wanted to talk to him, but Dale had his bundle of clothes for an excuse and he went

in, rather hoping the two would take the hint.

To that end he lingered within the room, looking at his scattered belongings and wondering just how complete had been the search which Cynthy had led him to believe must have taken place that morning. At first glance he could not tell whether anything had been moved. He had unpacked rather hurriedly, his mind on his fishing. Cynthy had started to tidy the room, but she had not gone very far with it, his books seeming to have caught and held her attention. Now that he thought of it, he remembered that she had been browsing through one of the volumes when he walked in upon her and the start she gave proved how absorbed she had been. It must have been Shelley, for that book lay by itself on the dresser, beside the neat little row she had made of the others; but she had not completed the arrangement, he saw, for only four books were there—five with the Shelley she had been looking at.

Dale wheeled and scrutinized the room, his underlip between his teeth. He had taken the books out of the trunk tray to get at a soft-collared shirt that lay beneath them. He had stacked the books on the floor at the end of the dresser; the entire seven, he was certain. Those rich red morocco bindings did not tend to encourage care-

lessness or a scattering of the volumes; they made too sumptuous a unit when placed together, too bright a spot of color among his things. One would as soon toss fine china vases here and there as those beautifully bound, hand-tooled books.

Dale's hand went to them now, his fingers sliding caressingly over the satiny leather while he counted. Five. There ought to be seven. Five; he counted again like a child not quite sure of its accuracy. A deep line appeared between his eyebrows as he scanned the titles of the remaining books. Browning was gone, and one volume of Shakespeare. But with his name stamped in gold on the cover he could not quite believe, even then, that the thieves would take two books—unless, of course, they had some vague idea that they might have the money in them.

"Cynthy tells me somebody tackled you again up the creek for that money of yours." Quin Burnett, standing with one hand braced against the casing, spoke abruptly from the doorway.

"I asked her not to," Dale said, glancing up. "But I don't know as it matters much one way or the other."

"They didn't get it, from what Cynthy says you told her." Quin came in, his presence seeming to fill the small room as if several persons

had entered, though Dale was only vaguely conscious of it at the time. What he did realize at the moment was a sudden impulse to tell Quin all about it—things he had not yet hinted to a soul. He wanted Quin to talk just as frankly to him and to tell him why it was that he always looked so worried when the money was mentioned. But the missing books obtruded themselves upon his consciousness now and thrust the other thought aside for the moment.

"Is Cynthy out there?" he asked with seeming irrelevance. "I saw her with you a minute ago."

"Yes, what is it?" Cynthy herself came in and stood by her father, looking at Dale with that impersonal interest which is so baffling and so utterly chilling.

"I wondered if you had taken a couple of my books. I had seven of these bindings, and I just noticed there are only five here. I saw you looking at them—"

"I picked them up from the floor where you had thrown them, certainly." Invisible icicles dripped from Cynthy's words. "I love books too well to see them thrown down like old shoes. But as for stealing them—"

"Oh, good Lord!" groaned Dale, his face flaring crimson.

"—As for *stealing* them," Cynthy repeated implacably, "I can only assure you that I am innocent of any—"

"Nobody said you stole anything, Cynthy," her father reproved her with gentle firmness. "That ain't a word that's ever been used to one of my blood, or is ever going to be, I hope. Emery thinks maybe you might've borrowed a couple. Ain't that right, Dale?"

"Why, sure, that's all I meant," Dale hurriedly attested, swallowing dryly. "And Cynthy's perfectly welcome—it's because she heard some one in here after I left this morning—"

The door from the living room opened diffidently and Mrs. Burnett's flushed and somewhat swarthy face peered in.

"What's the matter? Somebody sick or hurt, or something? I heard all of you talkin' in here, and I didn't know—"

"No, come in, Mrs. Burnett. I was just showing the folks some of my things." Where Quin and Cynthy were struck rather speechless, Dale's trained self-possession covered what would otherwise have been an awkward moment.

"Oh, golly, what gallumptious books!" Donna, looking over her mother's shoulder, ducked in and pounced upon the lot. "Honest-to-God morocco, and his name in solid gold!

I'll bet his girl friends gave their boy friend a shower—what are they? Oh—poetry! No wonder they're pure and untarnished. I never thought they were all that highbrow in Chicago; how come?"

"A bookish friend gave them to me," Dale grinned. "He thought I might need something to be a companion to me in my isolated life out here in the wilds of Wyoming. He made the selection, Donna—I plead not guilty."

"Mother," Cynthy asked with sweet incisiveness, "did you take two of Mr. Emery's beautiful red books?"

"Me?" Mrs. Burnett started. "My land, what would I want of two books? I wouldn't have time to read one, let alone two."

"Of course not," Dale agreed soothingly. "I must have mislaid them. They're keepsakes, or I wouldn't have mentioned—"

"What were they? Poetry too?" Donna was still fingering the red morocco.

"Browning and Shakespeare. It doesn't matter; I'll run across them somewhere."

"You sure will, big boy. Nobody's going to run off with that kind of brain food around this ranch—except Cynth. She's the family highbrow. Little Donna's on vacation and you couldn't force a line of that stuff into my brain on a bet. They look good enough to eat, but I

don't want 'em." And with a derisive wave of her pretty hand Donna went back to her piano playing.

"Well, I ain't got 'em, and Judy don't know *b* from a bull's foot. Maybe Cynthy carried 'em off to read—she's always got her nose glued to a book, and poetry wouldn't stop her; I've seen her set and read 'Paradise Lost' just like it was a story. Where is that old book of 'Paradise Lost,' Cynthy? Mr. Emery might like to read it." As if no more remained to be said, Mrs. Burnett turned and walked heavily away to the kitchen.

"I *didn't!*" cried Cynthy under her breath, going red and white by turns. "There were just five books on the floor when I came in to do the room. I wanted to get all the work done I could before breakfast, and I knew you were off fishing for I heard you—twice."

"No, you heard the fellow that helped himself to two books," Dale said, in a gentler tone than Cynthy had any right to expect after the way she had snubbed him. "He may have wanted to make sure I didn't have a few thousands tucked between the leaves."

"I thought of that," Cynthy observed spitefully. "That's why I was so certain there were only five. I examined them all to make sure they weren't trick volumes, some of them."

Quin walked over and picked up a book, felt the covers, flipped the leaves slowly, looked at the back and laid it down, shaking his head thoughtfully.

"If somebody come in here and stole two of your books, he done it to rile you up," he said. "Wanted to scare you, maybe, into tippin' your hand." He let his glance travel slowly around the room, turned his eyes toward the door into the living room, got out his pipe and began slowly to fill it with tobacco from a twisted leather pouch.

"I guess early mornin's about the only time anybody could of come in here without bein' seen by some of us," he mused. "The girls and their mother wouldn't be up, nor the squaw either, much before six or a little after. I got up and went off down to the lower meadow before breakfast this mornin', and Neal was down doin' the chores. He was just through feedin' the pigs when I come back and put my horse in the stable. We come on up to the house together. I could ask Neal if he saw anybody prowlin' around, but I don't s'pose it would do any good. He'd 'a' said something about it if he had."

"I did think Cynthy dreamed she heard some one," Dale said, "but those missing books prove she was right; some one was in here ransacking

my stuff again. It certainly does beat the deuce!"

Quin eyed him meditatively while he lighted his pipe.

"Well, I guess you're about ready to give in, now, and go put that money in the bank," he drawled between puffs. "They'll likely have the hide off'n you next!"

"It doesn't seem to worry him a bit that he's just daring people to rob him," Cynthy said indignantly.

"No," Dale agreed ironically, "I can't seem to get that point of view, can I? You've taken the trouble to point it out to me several times too, but all I can see is that I'm trying to go my way peaceably, minding my own business—which, by the way, would put the money into circulation in a perfectly legitimate way. If I buy a ranch as I hope to do, there will be work for cowboys and ranch hands, and from what your father has told me, the country should be glad to have a going concern come in here. It would not be on a very large scale, perhaps, and yet the kind of outfit I want wouldn't be a flivver, either."

"That's all right," Quin gravely commented. "We're glad to see folks come in that can put some money into the country. It's the way you brought it that's raisin' hob." He looked out toward the hills with every tired line in his face

sharply accentuated in the bright light of mid-forenoon. "Half the crimes in the world could be prevented if folks would just use common horse sense," he added sternly.

Dale flushed a little at that, but he did not seem to find anything to say, though Cynthy looked at him, half expecting him to make some retort.

"Well, it's your money and you'll do as you please about it," Quin said, as he turned to go. "You'll bring trouble on yourself worse than losin' the clothes off your back, but I can't force you to take care of your money. I've said all I'm goin' to, and if you're robbed it's your own look-out and you'll have nobody to blame but yourself. Only," he added, looking over his shoulder at Dale, "I'm hopin' it won't happen in my house or on my ranch!"

"I'll see that it doesn't, Mr. Burnett, and thank you for the hint," Dale said stiffly. "I think I understand your position and I can't blame you in the least. But you must admit, too, that no man with any nerve or backbone at all is going to be bluffed or bullied or scared."

Quin paused in the doorway, sucking hard at his pipe.

"Now, don't get huffy. I don't mean you ain't welcome here, just as long as you want to stay.

But it does go against the grain to think that a man's property ain't safe in my house in broad daylight, and if you've got to lose your money before you're satisfied they can get it, I hope it won't be here you get your lesson." Before Dale thought of any proper reply to that, Quin mounted his horse and rode away.

"Now you've got Father all stirred up," Cynthy reproached, standing by the door as if she too were about to leave him to solve his own mystery as best he could.

"Well, I'm sorry, and if I can borrow a horse I'll ride up and accept Hugh's invitation. And I wish you'd take charge of these books, Cynthy, until I'm ready to settle down somewhere. I really do think a lot of them, and if they're going to be stolen—"

"I'm sure I don't know why I should take the responsibility," Cynthy objected, though her eyes softened a little.

"I didn't ask you to be responsible for a thing. I just want to make some sort of peace offering, and since I can't give them to you outright, at least let me leave them with you. Part of them, anyway," he coaxed, smiling across at her with a look not easy to resist. "I'm going away, and I want something to remind you how much I appreciate all your advice. If you're very friendly

and forgiving, I might take it later on; you can't tell."

Though he laughed when he said that, and though Cynthy refused to join in the laughter, she had three of the books in her hands when she went to her own room and Dale was left looking very much pleased about something.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE WALLET IN THE WOOD BOX

THE amused smile lingered while Dale repacked his belongings. It was there when Donna called him in to help her put just the right snap and stutter into the latest syncopated jazz song which she was learning, and he obeyed the summons willingly enough, though he had fully intended to leave the ranch at once in spite of Burnett's tacit apology. But as he beat the time for Donna, he found himself slipping back into a spirit of friendliness toward the Burnett family. He listened to the quick footsteps of Cynthy as she busied herself in the big kitchen with the plodding squaw, apparently dismissing from her mind all problems not directly related to baking day. Donna, quite happy in having a playfellow, pulled one song after another from the stack of music she had piled on a chair, and Dale dutifully sang his way through them all. It was the rose that is said to grow in No Man's Land which recalled him at last to the little world around him.

"I'm going up to Hugh's," he murmured between the first and second verses. "How far is it, Donna? Think I could find the way alone?"

Donna struck a few sour notes, as she called them, and leaned to look out on the porch where her mother sat with a pile of mending beside her.

"S-sh—if you do, I want to go along," she whispered. "Don't let Mother know, or Dad either. They'd make a row about nice young ladies running after young men. They're absolutely archaic in some things, and they don't seem to realize I'm grown up. But—"

"What young man are you running after? Me?"

"No, stupid; I wouldn't think of presuming. It's Hugh. And the fond parents do not approve—"

"What are you whispering about in there, Donna? If it's something you ain't willing your mother should hear, it better not be said at all," her mother called sharply from the porch.

"And what about Cynthy? Do I have to shout everything I say about her?" Donna's voice was sweetly tolerant.

"I don't know what you'd want to say about Hyacinth that you'd need to whisper," her mother retorted. "I did think college would learn

you as good manners as you got at home, but seems as if you take pride in doing things you've been told not to. You know better than to whisper; or you ought to, anyway."

"All right, then; I think Cynth ought to bob her hair and not go around looking like somebody's grandmother."

"Is that anything to whisper to a young man? Land knows you said it to Cynthy times enough last winter—I don't see as there's anything secret about it."

Donna shook her head in mute acceptance of her mother's nagging, and went on playing the prelude loudly enough to cover her whispered warning:

"We'll get Cynth and just go for a ride—and —'There's a rose that grows—in No Man's La-and—' "

But they did not get Cynthy and go for a ride that afternoon. While they were at dinner the sky darkened swiftly, there came the hoarse rumbling of thunder drawing nearer every moment, and before they had left the table the rain was coming down in slant sheets of water. Quin and Neal Somers had hastily left the house at the first mutter and gone hurrying down to close the stable and to make sure that the hay crew were doing all in their power to protect the hay from the

coming storm. They returned wet as muskrats just out of a millpond, water running in streams from their wide hat brims.

"Good thing we got that big stack topped this forenoon," Quin said, pulling off his wet coat and hanging it over a chair back in the kitchen to dry. "I was kinda suspicious of the weather all morning, and put all the men to work gettin' the hay in. Good thing we got back yesterday, though, or that big stack would be all open to the weather."

Neal gave him a sidelong, affronted look.

"Oh, I don't know; I started them stackin' hay yesterday morning, just as quick as the dew dried off," he said sullenly. "I don't see as the work was draggin' much with you gone, Quin."

"No, I don't say it was draggin'," Quin answered him placatingly. "But I spurred 'em up a little, just the same. I could feel this coming."

Neal did not say anything to that, but he scowled as he left the room and he did not close the door as gently as he might have done. Dale glanced at Burnett, wondering what he would do about it, but he was thoughtfully filling his pipe and seemed unaware of the insolence of his hired man. Or did he ignore it deliberately? It was not

the attitude an ex-sheriff would be expected to take and it did not harmonize with the strong lines in his face.

But Dale had resolved to abandon his study of faces as an index to character and turned his mind to other things. Burnett lighted his pipe and went in to change his wet clothes, and since he did not return, one might assume that he was taking a nap. Mrs. Burnett went back to her mending. Cynthy disappeared, presumably going to her room, and Donna got a magazine and curled up on the couch by the window, where a murky light streamed through the storm. There seemed nothing for Dale to do save make the best of a dull afternoon. He couldn't even flirt with Donna while her mother was ensconsced in a rocking chair not three feet from the piano, and the storm had settled to a steady downpour which promised to last the rest of the day. There would be no riding that day, or fishing either. It was not likely that any one in the Burnett family played bridge, unless perhaps Donna had a smattering knowledge of the game.

For awhile Dale stood in the shelter of the porch and watched the wind-lashed grove swaying in the gusts of wind, but in that high altitude the rain had brought a definite chill with it, and he soon retreated to his room and his mutilated

fly book, and filled an hour or so with replacing his missing flies. He wished Cynthy was there so that he could teach her the fine art of making trout flies, but although he tapped on the partition he got no response, and after awhile he tired of the work, rolled himself in a blanket and took a nap, while the rain drummed on the low roof and swished against the window.

It might have been midnight instead of afternoon, so quiet was the Burnett household. Even the squaw Judy must have taken herself off to her quarters, wherever they were, for long before Dale went to sleep there was no sound in the kitchen, and it was partly the conviction that every one was enjoying a siesta that brought drowsiness to his own eyelids. You may say what you like of the languorous heat of the South, but there is nothing like a rainy afternoon in the ranch land to send an entire household into temporary coma.

At suppertime it was still raining a steady drizzle, though the wind had dropped with the waning daylight. Quin and Neal had bestirred themselves an hour or two earlier and had attended to the stable chores, Neal clumping in with stiffly crackling slicker and muddy boots, carrying a lard bucket full of eggs warm from the nest, two soft little feathers clinging wetly to

the topmost one where the rain had splashed it. Though it was barely six o'clock, the clouds hung low and thick, and gray twilight filled the room. Mrs. Burnett lighted the big Rochester lamp with the flowered white shade and set it in the center of the table, midway between the huge platter of home-cured ham and fried eggs and the oblong dish of mashed potatoes, a plate of hot biscuits flanking it on one side and the butter and delicately brown milk gravy on the other. There was no pretense of serving in courses at a table where Mrs. Burnett presided; one could not expect it of a woman who still slept on a feather bed.

But the homely meal brought a sense of comfort to Dale. He loved the mellow lamplight which cast a softening glow on the faces he was beginning to know in their changing expressions called forth by the commonplace emotions of everyday living. Even Neal Somers seemed less moody to-night, and Quin cracked a dry joke or two in his soft drawling voice, his eyes twinkling humorously in a consciously sober face. Donna was frankly bored but as frankly hungry, and Cynthy and her mother debated quite openly the imprudence of dipping into a jar of fresh strawberry preserves in honor of the biscuits, yielding finally to Donna, who begged for them because she had eaten boarding-school fare all winter and

hadn't so much as smelled a preserve. So Judy was sent for them and told to look at the second pan of biscuits and to put another stick of wood in the stove.

It was into this peaceful domestic scene that Dale's mystery unexpectedly projected itself, hand in hand as it were, with the new strawberry preserves.

They heard Judy come into the kitchen from the pantry, and waited while she slammed the oven shut and thrust a stick of wood into the stove. They heard her grunt, and with freshly buttered biscuits they eyed the door through which she presently waddled, straight black bangs hanging down to her little black eyes set in a moist, good-natured, moon-shaped face. In one hand she held a round bowl of imitation cut glass filled with fragrant preserves. In the other she clutched something not so readily distinguished. Setting the preserves down with a gentle thump between Cynthy and her mother, she waddled gravely around the table and laid an oblong brown object before Quin.

"Ketch-um wood box," she grunted laconically. "Mebby-so you lose-um you pockey. Ketch-um you coat by wood box. Yass. Damfino."

"Hunh?" Unmeasured, blank surprise filled Quin's face, his eyes, his voice. "Found it in the

wood box? It ain't mine, Judy. I never saw it before."

"Ketch-um wood box. Damfino," Judy repeated stolidly.

"It's mine," said Dale, half rising from his chair, and sat down again, wishing blindly that he had bitten his tongue upon the words.

"Yours?" Quin turned the wallet over, looked at it, looked at Dale. "How'd it get in the wood box?"

"I don't know," said Dale, very quietly. "It's the wallet I bought in Cheyenne after my other was taken. I had it this morning, up the creek."

"What's in it?" Quin's voice was neither harsh nor unbelieving, but rather official; the customary identification of lost or stolen property evidently was a habit of routine with him.

"Money—I can't say exactly how much, but around forty dollars, I think. And my initials printed in ink inside the flap. T. E.—T for Teasdale. Cynthy knows I missed it this morning when we went back up there after I was—attacked."

"Attacked? On our ranch? Who ever heard of such a thing!" gasped Mrs. Burnett, but a sharp glance from her husband silenced further speech.

Quin was opening the wallet, taking out the money and counting it as he laid the bills along-

side his plate. Forty-seven dollars all told, he made it, the others mechanically checking the figures as they watched him. He pulled his spectacle case from his vest pocket, put on his glasses, tilted the empty bill fold to the lamplight and read the initials, his lips forming the letters, T. E. He looked at Dale sharply over his glasses, handed the wallet over to him, picked up the money and extended that also, took off his glasses and put them away carefully, deliberately, his mind evidently engrossed in wrestling with this amazing discovery. And while he kept silence, he dominated the little group completely, holding them frozen to immobility while they watched him.

Quin leaned back in his chair, his face suddenly tired beyond belief. He picked up his knife, looked at it absently and laid it down. Then he looked straight at Dale.

"Well, this looks to me like a show-down," he stated slowly, as if he were formulating his thoughts while he spoke. "They said they'd get me. I knew they'd figure out some scheme, but I never suspicioned they was using *you* to do it. A stranger like you—no, I wasn't lookin' for that kind of frame-up. That robbery in the hotel looked awful real. Fooled Varney, all right, and Burke too. And you look as honest and above-

board as any young fellow I ever saw in my life." He eyed Dale with a terrible intensity of which he was wholly unconscious.

"These frame-ups," he said quietly, "they generally have got a kick-back to 'em. They look all right when they're planned, but there's always something that don't pan out as it's expected. Puttin' that pocketbook in the wood box, now—that looks like awful strong evidence against me, don't it? But it ain't. About the only thing you've done, young fellow, is give yourself dead away!"

"I don't quite get you, Mr. Burnett," Dale said constrainedly, too utterly taken aback to be able to think very clearly. "Are you saying that *I* put that wallet in your kitchen wood box?"

"Who else? I don't see any other way it could have got there. You had it this morning—you say yourself you took it fishin' with you. You come back all het up and sayin' somebody jumped you up at the falls and took all your clothes away from you. You took Cynthy up there and showed her your clothes piled on a rock, but you made it a point to tell her your pocketbook was missin'. Then you come back and claim somebody 'd been in your room while you was up there gettin' stripped. You say two of your books are missin' to prove your stuff

had been gone through. You made the claim, too, that somebody went through your grips and trunk at Dalton's. And now, here your pocketbook turns up in the wood box right back of where I'd hung up my coat.

"If all that was true, it'd look as if I'd trailed you up the creek and peeled your clothes off you to search 'em. It looks as if I kept the money and was simple-minded enough to pack it around in my pocket, and take a chance on leavin' it there all afternoon, with my coat hangin' on a chair in the kitchen where anybody on the ranch could go snoopin' through it. You could say, too, I s'pose, that I heard you talkin' about goin' fishin', last night when I went to bed. I did hear you say something about gettin' trout enough for breakfast. You might even say I took Neal, here, and a blanket, and trailed you—"

"Well, don't drag *me* into it!" Neal cried vehemently, galvanized to speech by the mention of his name.

"I ain't draggin' you into it. I'm sayin' beforehand what could be said if a person wanted to build up his story so it would wash without shrinkin' before a jury."

"There's just one thing the matter with it, Mr. Burnett," Dale said, in a voice of repressed feeling, "and that is, it isn't true. My stuff *was*

searched at Dalton's; I *was* smothered in a blanket and stripped, this morning at the falls. This wallet *was* taken and kept—and I've nothing to do with its being in the wood box. That shrinks the story considerably right at the start, it seems to me."

Quin leaned forward, his eyes boring into Dale's.

"And do you say *I* put it there?" Like a keen-edged knife his question cut straight to the heart of Dale's meaning.

For a full half-minute the two sat staring, each probing the other's thoughts.

"No," Dale said at last. "I don't think you're that big a fool. Even if you're a crook, you're too smart to make that kind of a break."

"Pretty talk, this is, I must say!" Mrs. Burnett cried tearfully. "Quarrelin' right at the supper table, callin' each other crooks and thieves!"

"I just *hate* all this fighting!" exclaimed Donna, jumping up in a frenzy of protest. "I hate that darned money that's making all the trouble! I wish I'd never come home at all!" She rushed out of the room and flung herself sobbing on the couch.

"I'm sorry," said Dale, stiffly polite, his eyes turning toward his sniffling hostess. "It's unpardonable, of course, to intrude my private af-

fairs on strangers this way, and I can only assure you that this was wholly unexpected and unintentional on my part. I'll go, of course, as soon as possible."

"Well, nobody asked you to go yet. Eat your supper, both of you, and stop jangling over that pocketbook," Mrs. Burnett admonished in a mollified tone, wiping her eyes on a corner of the tablecloth. "Time enough to get to the bottom of it—Bella Donna, come back and finish your supper!" And Mrs. Burnett passed Dale the bowl of preserves to further cement the truce she had herself declared.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"YOU THINK FATHER'S A THIEF?"

But Dale had lost his appetite for strawberry preserves and hot biscuits. Cynthy, across the table from him, was sitting in a frozen calm, her eyes glowing darkly out of her white face. Involuntarily he flinched when his fingers brushed against the wallet he had laid beside his plate. What a damnable situation! What had precipitated it? Was it the bald accident it seemed—that gross, stupid, old squaw lugging the thing in just when they were all supremely contented and wholly unsuspecting? Judy couldn't have known what it would do to that group around the table, but if she had planned it, she could scarcely have chosen a more fiendishly inopportune moment, it seemed to Dale.

Somehow they sat the meal through. Somehow he choked down a few mouthfuls of food, drank his coffee, passed the butter to Quin, who refused it with a preoccupied shake of the head quite unlike his usual courteous manner. Cynthy did not even pretend to eat, and presently she excused

herself and left the table, her father giving her a questioning look and relapsing again into his abstraction.

Superficially the brief clash had smoothed itself out and a quarrel had been averted, but Dale felt that a chasm of distrust had opened between the Burnett family and himself. How deep it was only time could tell, and what lay hidden at the bottom of it he refused just then to guess.

One thing was certain; he could not and would not remain under Quin Burnett's roof after the charges Quin had brought against him. The very unexpectedness of being accused as party to a frame-up stunned him. He had to get away where he could think over this new angle of the affair and decide just what was best to do about it.

The rain had dwindled to a desultory sprinkle and in the west the clouds had parted to let through a pale yellow gleam from the sun before it slid down behind the Laramie Mountains. It would not be dark for an hour or more, probably, and a man could walk a long way in an hour if he bestirred himself. With his lips compressed and his eyes smoldering with angry humiliation, Dale got into hiking boots and his overcoat, stuffed a few needful things into the capacious pockets, and with his fishing tackle and creel he

left the house and struck off briskly along the road which Hugh Mowerby and his companions had followed the night before.

It was not until he had reached the top of a hill half a mile away and stopped to breathe and to look back upon the rambling old house sprawling in the valley below, that he remembered he had been guilty of a grave breach of etiquette in leaving without a word of thanks or appreciation to Mrs. Burnett for her hospitality. But he would not go back now, he thought; besides, Mrs. Burnett was probably quite unaware of her rights as a hostess and would be only too relieved to have him out of the house after the scene at the supper table. Cynthy would curl her lip at his bad manners, but she too would no doubt be glad he was gone.

Set back against the aspen grove with the river rushing down from the rugged canyon above, the house even in that melancholy light seemed brooding in a profound tranquillity which only the ripened years could give. The little golden squares of sun-lighted windows spoke of peace and comfort within, as if the place sheltered only love and well being and no sinister thing could find lodgment there. Dale's eyes grew wistful while he gazed. Even in the twenty-four hours he had spent there he had begun to feel at home,

in spite of the fact that distrust of the owner was hovering always close to his foreconsciousness.

As he stood there two faces rose distinctly before him: Quin's, as he leaned back in his chair at the table, his face old and tired; and Cynthy's, as she stared straight before her, lips pressed tightly together, eyes deep wells of troubled thought. What were they thinking, those two? Whatever it was, Dale felt that Cynthy shared her father's thoughts, and that Donna and her mother were shut completely away from that secret understanding. Peaceful as it looked down there, the Burnett family stood to-night divided against itself; Donna and her mother fretting against the disturbance they did not understand, Cynthy and her father standing shoulder to shoulder, facing some grim thing from which they shielded the other two. But whether that thing was guilt or not Dale was not quite prepared to say.

He turned away from the valley and walked on up the narrow road, deep-rutted by the rain, little veined channels showing in the yellow soil where the water had raced down in tiny rivulets during the storm. Ahead of him the narrow valley seemed to draw in to a walled canyon, toward which the road went winding through rocks and

bushes, Meadow Horse Creek, as Cynthy had called the stream with the falls, tumbling noisily along over rocks spray-washed and shining. Burnett's ranch seemed to lie up along the rounded grassy hills on either side.

Cattle fed upon the slopes and a few horses galloped up to a fence near the road to stare wide-eyed, heads up-flung and nostrils belled to catch the scent of him. As Dale walked toward them, hand outstretched ingratiatingly, they shook their heads, wheeled and galloped away, rounding abruptly upon their muddy tracks to stop and stare again at a safer distance. Half-grown colts, these were, their hips branded with a straight bar above a 7, distinct and easy to read even for a man unused to range symbols.

Their easy-muscled stride, their satiny new coats of hair held Dale's gaze as had the house back there in the valley, and for a little while he forgot that darkness would be upon him before he could hope to reach his destination, even if he hurried. But even when the thought came to him he lingered, leaning with one hand against a post while he watched, fascinated, the pert, springy movements of the colts and their almost human inquisitiveness. This was a bit of what had brought him West; the wide reaches of wilderness, the freedom from man's ugly activities,

range stock that would stand shy as deer to gaze before they fled his presence. The last level rays of the sun shining suddenly through an opening turned their glossy coats to glistening bronze which dulled even as Dale stood watching. The sun was gone at last and the colts, snorting and kicking out their heels, went racing back across the level, down into a gully out of sight, to appear on a farther steep slope, still galloping wildly.

Dale wondered what had started them off like that. He was going on when suddenly the sound of galloping horses behind him made him turn to look. Here came Cynthy in khaki breeches and boots and old red sweater, riding swiftly toward him, a saddled horse loping at the end of a lead-rope, empty stirrups swinging as he came. Dale's heart gave a jump or two as he stood and waited for her to come up.

"Father wants you to take this horse," she said bluntly, pulling her sorrel pony to a stand. "There's no sense in your starting off afoot this way—it's seven miles up to Mowerby's and it will be pitch dark before you could get a third of the distance. I brought a safe horse," she added maliciously. "It's the one Judy always rides."

"Oh, thanks," drawled Dale, member of the Allerton polo team and a hard man on the field.

"I really don't deserve it after leaving as I did, without notice or apology to your mother."

"Oh, Mother doesn't mind. It's Father I'm thinking about." Her lip quivered, a weakness she attempted to hide from Dale by turning her face away. "This thing has hit him pretty hard. He was coming himself with Nig, but I made him let me. I—I wanted to talk to you about Father." She glanced at him impatiently, where he stood thoughtfully rubbing the old black horse's nose. "Well, what's the matter? Get on, why don't you? I'll ride up to the forks with you and make sure you take the right road, and you can go on alone from there. Hugh can send Nig back any time. Here, let me hold your fishing rod for you while you get on," she offered curtly, as he still hesitated.

"Oh, thanks, but I think I can manage all right. I was thinking I'd just send you back and make the hike, anyway. But I suppose that would entail an argument."

"Yes, it would. Father wouldn't like it, and he's had enough to bear without my adding a feather's weight to his worry. He'd just come on himself to make sure you didn't get lost in the hills."

"I don't know why that should worry him," Dale said, giving her an ironical smile as he

swung up into the saddle. "Thinking what he does of me, the quicker I'm lost, the better he should like it."

"That's all you know about Father," she retorted. "What I want to say is, Father's certain in his own mind that you are—well, to put it plainly, lying about that fifty thousand. He can't understand why, unless you've been sent here to dangle the bait before—before those who would try to get it. He doesn't really think you're trying to make him out a crook, except that you're trying the same thing with every one. He thinks you sent word out yourself that you were coming with all that money on you—he says no sane man would really do a thing like that." She looked at Dale appraisingly, caught his blank stare fixed upon her and looked away again with an impatient sigh. "What *are* you after, anyway, Mr. Emery?" she demanded abruptly.

"A ranch with a trout stream running by the house, and a few cattle and some good horses," Dale told her guilelessly and, as it happened, truthfully. "I think now I'd like to raise horses instead of cattle. Those youngsters that went tearing off across the gulch when you rode up look to me to have the makings of corking good polo ponies, some of them. I'd like to try my hand at breeding for polo ponies, anyway.

It would be much more interesting than raising beef cattle."

"Polo!" Cynthy ejaculated, eyeing him distrustfully, as he jogged alongside her on Judy's safe horse, Nig. Well, he had the look of a rider—that much she had to admit; and a flush crept into her face that had looked white and drawn.

"I don't know why not polo. With the right stock one should get the best ponies in the world here. They'd be sure-footed, they'd have good wind and action—racing over these hills from the time they're foaled—by thunder, I know now that it's a place to raise polo ponies I'm after!"

Cynthy drooped in the saddle, her eyes on the road just in front of her horse.

"I wish you'd look for it somewhere else, then," she said dejectedly.

"But why? I haven't done anything, have I? If people insist on shaking me down every morning before breakfast in the hope of copping fifty thousand dollars—"

"Tell me one thing," Cynthy said desperately. "Did you put that wallet in the wood box?"

Dale stared at her.

"Do you need my word on that?" he countered sharply. "Use your reason, girl. Why should I do a cheap, melodramatic trick like that?"

"That," said Cynthy dully, "is what I'd give a

good deal to know. At least, I'd give a good deal to know how it got there. Of course, on the face of it, Father might have dropped it out of his pocket, but that to me is absolutely impossible; it would be to any one who knew him—how rigidly honest he is in everything. Why, he resigned from the sheriff's office because—"

"Yes? Because why?" Dale urged when she halted there.

"Because he wouldn't shut his eyes to certain things that were going on, and he couldn't enforce the law in all cases. He—well, he just was too good and human and honest to hold the office when he saw what he was up against. And he made enemies," she went on bitterly. "People talked a good deal, and there was a great protest raised when he did it. Some things couldn't very well be covered up—you know how it is in politics. His resignation was a slap in the face to some rather powerful people in the country, and there came near being a regular shake-up.

"That's why his first thought was that you'd been sent to frame him. You couldn't wonder at it, if you knew all the circumstances. You are very unaccountable, Mr. Emery, you must see that."

"Unaccountable in what way?" Though Dale knew about what she meant, of course.

And Cynthy recognized that fact and refused to be drawn further on the subject.

"Unless one knew the truth about you," she went on relentlessly, "one couldn't find a place to start on the mystery. It may be all fiction, putting it nicely. Father's right; you could easily have lied about what happened at Dalton's, and you could have faked that attack on you this morning. You could have—"

"How about that blanket?"

"That blanket you came home in? They're common enough. We have four or five brown army blankets like that. You could have taken it off your bed."

"You made my bed—did you miss a blanket?"

"No," said Cynthy, catching her breath at the thought, but meeting his eyes honestly for all that. "No, your blankets were all on the bed and they weren't much disturbed. That lets you out there." She pulled her brows together. "But that wallet—it didn't put itself in the wood box. *Somebody* did it."

"How about the squaw?"

Cynthy shook her head in violent denial of that suggestion.

"Judy's lived with us ever since I can remember. Father fed her and old Indian Tom, her husband, when the Indians were just about starv-

ing one terrible winter. She's been with us ever since. She's just as honest as I am. I'd bank on Judy anywhere, any time."

"Well, then, how about Neal Somers?"

"He's our cousin," Cynthy discounted that. "Mother's nephew, to be exact. He's lived with us a long time. He's cranky sometimes and stubborn, but he wouldn't do a thing like that. What would be his object? And how would he get hold of the wallet in the first place?"

"It could hardly have been a stranger," Dale pointed out, but Cynthy shook her head at that.

"It doesn't seem probable, but neither does any of it, for that matter; your having so much money, for instance. To tell you the truth, I think that's the most improbable feature of the whole business. But what worries me most," she sighed, "is the effect it's having on Father. It's harder on him, I do believe, than the row he had when he resigned as sheriff. I know I haven't seen him so upset over anything since."

"I don't know why it should have worried him, except of course this last stunt of my wallet turning up in Judy's wood box. Up until to-night I was the only one concerned, Now, of course—"

"Do you think he had anything to do with that? I want the straight truth, Mr. Emery. I've got to have it."

There was no putting Cynthy off now. The matter had reached a point where for his own clarity of thought he needed to talk it over with some one, and while Cynthy was not the person he would have chosen, because of her sympathies and her loyalty to her father, here she was demanding to know his innermost thoughts.

"Honestly, Cynthy, I don't know what to think. Your father is the last person on earth one would suspect of being—of doing such a thing." With her eyes upon him, Dale could not bring himself to utter the word thief. "But I've wondered a lot. You see, I knew that only the ones who went after my money in the hotel knew that they had failed to find it. The police and newspapers and the general public assumed that the money had been taken. But your father right away caught onto the fact that they hadn't got what they went after. At the time I just thought he was pretty keen, but afterwards I wondered if it might be more than guesswork. Then at Dalton's—well, it was still possible that for some reason—my protection, perhaps—he was the one who had gone through my stuff while I was out of the room. Hugh, of course, knew what room I had, but that's the only possible connection he could have with it, and he was dancing every dance. I'm sure he wasn't even thinking about it.

Then here—your father *did* hear my plan to go fishing, Cynthy. He said so himself. And his coat was hanging right there—"

"So you think," said Cynthy in a tense, pinched kind of voice, "my father's a thief and a liar!"

"No," said Dale, "I don't, and that's the funny part of it. I've tried to—up until to-night I did half believe it, in spite of his personality and that atmosphere of—of *goodness* that surrounds him. But that wallet to-night was *too* strong evidence, if you get what I mean. If your father was a crook, he'd have a fox skinned for cunning, and this was too coarse. Just as I told him there at the supper table, he wouldn't be that big a fool. It looks to me very much like a plant; a frame-up, as he said—only I'm not the one that did it.

"It was framed on both of us, I believe. And what I really think is that some one sneaked into the house this afternoon, when everybody was curled up taking naps, saw your dad's coat hanging there, and planted the bill fold where it would do the most harm. I believe they had something of that sort in mind when they returned my clothes and kept the wallet."

Cynthy drew a long, quivering breath like a child that has sobbed itself to sleep.

"What started me thinking that," Dale went

on, unconsciously holding his cased fishing rod as if it were a polo stick at rest, "is when your dad said he knew 'they' were trying to get him, and he was expecting some sort of frame-up. You know, it may be that he's right, at that. They might be trying to get my money and pin the evidence on him. And if that's the case, it's about as dirty a deal as I ever heard of, and I grew up in a city that's popularly supposed to be the home of dirty deals!"

Cynthy rode along for a while in deep thought, her head bowed. Beside her Dale waited, glancing at her now and then expectantly, both heedless of their loitering pace and oblivious of the gathering dusk that was already blurring the distant peaks.

"All you've said takes it for granted that you've got that money," she said at last. "Father and I both think that's just a bluff." She looked at him half regretfully before she went firmly on with what she had to say. "I've got to be as frank as you have seemed to be with me, Mr. Emery. We don't believe you'd be such a fool as to carry fifty thousand dollars in actual cash around with you. It's like Father dropping that wallet in the wood box. It's just too absolutely brainless a thing to do. We give you credit for more intelligence than that."

"You'd have to hand it to me, though," Dale snorted, "if you found out that I had done it and got away with it, in spite of all the bandits in Wyoming being on my neck."

"Well, you just couldn't do it, that's all."

"Oh, couldn't I? When I've reached the goal I've set for myself, maybe you'll think differently."

"And it's a great goal, I must say, for a man like you! Even a kid would have more sense than to try such a thing. But I must say," she added grudgingly, "you've managed to make some people believe it, all right. That is, if things really happened up at the falls as you claimed they did, and if you didn't put that wallet in the wood box."

"Oh, damn the wallet in the wood box!" gritted Dale under his breath.

"All right, but that doesn't alter the fact that Judy found it there. She did. No human being could live and have less imagination than she's got."

"Or brains," Dale supplemented savagely.

"Yes, or brains. She's like a faithful old dog, except that she has the power of speech and can be taught to do housework. She wouldn't know enough to lie, even if she wanted to. She speaks what she knows and lets it go at that. When she

said she found the wallet in the wood box and she didn't know how it got there, you can bank on it that's the exact truth."

"Which brings us right back where we started. Your father or me. We're talking in circles, Cynthy."

"I know it, but I'm looking for the end. Either that, or get right down to the point of fact that answers the whole thing." She flung out a hand suddenly, almost touching him with her fingers. "Why, look here! If it's true, and you've got that money, *why* won't you put it in the bank?" She leaned and peered intently into his face. *"Why?"* she reiterated sharply.

"Oh, that fool's goal I've set for myself, I suppose," he retorted sullenly.

"I don't believe you've got it, that's why," she answered for herself. "No man on earth would run the risk you claim to be running. Or be as stubborn as you," she qualified dubiously. "But I simply can't believe it. They'd have got it, if it was in your possession and you're not just faking your various hold-ups."

"Well, they didn't," snapped Dale. "Laugh that off, will you? I don't care who the devil's after it, they've got to guess again, that's all."

"Oh, you—Dale Emery, you're *intolerable!"* gritted Cynthy. "There's your road—follow it

till you get somewhere. I'm through." And with that she wheeled and left him, as she had done once before that day, completely baffled and in a towering rage.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

POLO AND OTHER THINGS

In the big, low room which Hugh Mowerby called his den, Dale sprawled at ease after a breakfast faultlessly served by one Lee Chow, a grinning, weazened old Chinese cook. While he smoked, Dale's glance roved curiously around the walls, which were hung with beautifully mounted trophies, a huge bull buffalo head occupying the space over a wide mantel made of a split spruce log. The Indian rugs that covered the floor had been chosen with a careful eye to harmony, beauty of design and handiwork, as Dale knew very well from having spent much time and money on a collection of his own. Pottery, baskets, frontier guns and the weapons of various savage tribes made the room a small museum of primitive life, the more delightful to Dale because it was so wholly unexpected. Through an open doorway he glimpsed a grand piano in the living room beyond, and against the farther wall a big cabinet phonograph in rosewood.

Hugh, having given certain directions to a

rider outside, strolled in, his big hat on the back of his head, his boots leaving tracks on the stark reds and whites of the great rug he crossed to reach a certain big leather chair where he lazily deposited his long frame. A business man would have known that the two were about to go into conference, though Hugh would not think of calling it that.

"Well," he began, leisurely blowing out a match and tossing it negligently into the ashes of last night's fire, "we may as well get down to cases, Dale, and start the day off right. And to have a mark to shoot at, we'll start in the middle. You're here, and I'm glad of it; hope you'll stay a long, long time, and I don't care why. If it's a job you want, I can fix you all right, I guess. Tom, my brother, usually does the hiring, but he's gone. It don't matter—it's all right either way. Right now it'll be mostly riding—you say you can ride?"

"I don't know about driving cattle, but I can ride a horse, yes. For four years I've played forward in our polo team—"

"You *have?*" Hugh heaved himself upright in his chair. "You know polo, do you? Could you coach a team—good riders but green hands?"

"Why, yes, I think so. I've substituted as captain a few times—yes, I'd like nothing better.

Have you got the horses for it? The horses are half of it, in polo, you know. Light, active, quick—with a sporting spirit that makes them get right in and play the game as hard as their riders. I have a string of my own ponies at the Allerton and as soon as I get a place for them, I mean to bring them out. But if you got a few that can be trained—"

"My gosh, yes! We—say, on the square, Dale, do you really have to work for wages? I don't see how that fits in with a string of polo ponies in Chicago, damned if I do!"

"As a matter of fact, it doesn't. I'll have to own up, I guess. I was just stalling there in town, Hugh, for reasons of my own. I'm not broke yet, by a long shot. Dad left a business block or two down near the stockyards that'll feed me for awhile, I guess. I'm his only heir, you see. What I really want to do is stick around awhile and look over the country, fish and maybe hunt, as you suggested the other night, and eventually buy that ranch I came west to find. I want to breed polo ponies and train them for the market. I did think it was cattle I wanted to raise for beef, but I've changed my mind about that. There's a market for polo horses, and I know the game inside and out, all except the raising of them, and one can always hire good horse

breeders. Polo's about the only thing I'm really keen on, but it's always been a drag on the bank roll, so I looked on it as a darned luxury. It is, in the city. Out here it would be a business proposition and I believe I could make it pay too.

"So if it's polo you want, I'll send back to a friend of mine for mallets and balls, and we can start working out some of your best ponies and coaching a couple of teams. I'm anxious to see how these Wyoming horses show up for wind and action."

"How long would it take to get the sticks here? And say, how about having your horses shipped out? Or maybe," Hugh amended reluctantly, "that'd better wait till you're sure what you want to do. But if you wanted to send for them, I'd sure be glad to have 'em on the ranch—"

"Well, the horses would take a little time; but I could wire for the mallets," Dale offered, "soon as any one goes to town—"

"Hello! I can beat that," Hugh cried exuberantly, excited as a boy. "I'll send a man down to Dalton's right this morning and he can phone a wire in from there. You write the wire and I'll foot the bill, whatever it is. There's some blanks over there on the desk. Tell your friend to send a lot—the boys will probably bust plenty while they're learning. I've got a place I believe will

make a dandy field when it's smoothed off a little. Soon as you get your telegram ready, we'll go out and find somebody to take it in, and then I'll show you the field I've got in mind. And we can pick out a few horses too, while we're about it."

Dale had felt that his misadventure at Burnett's had defrauded him of his rightful sport and had meant to go fishing that day in spite of everything, but now he forgot all about it. The idea which the sight of those half-dozen two-year-olds in Burnett's pasture had brought to life now came to full desire as he rode out with Hugh to choose a polo field and the horses best fitted to the game. The telegram was sent by a lean young cowboy magnificently mounted on a big, deep-chested bay, and Bob Drew, another cow-puncher, set off with a team and light spring wagon for Burnett's to return the horse Nig, bring Dale's luggage and carry a note of thanks and farewell to Mrs. Burnett—a small social obligation which nagged at Dale until it was properly discharged.

Like two schoolboys he and Hugh talked and planned polo that day with a concentrated zeal which left no room for anything else in their minds. It was not until Bob returned that Dale was recalled to the reason for his leaving Burnett's so abruptly, and it was a quizzical remark of Bob's that did it.

"Say, Chicago, I hear you had a run-in with the old man down there," he said, with that easy familiarity which the close contacts of ranch life breed on the range. "Quin's sure on the peck. When I asked for your war bag he give a snort like a buck elk on the prod, and walked off and never made me no answer at all. Old lady kinda give me the bad eye too, when I handed her the note, and never had a word to say."

"My gosh, she must have a paralyzed jaw then," Hugh made skeptical comment. "What'd you do to 'er, Dale?"

"Nothing at all. We had a slight misunderstanding," Dale said cautiously, frowning at the way the thing was coming at him again.

"I'll say you did!" Bob grinned. "Neal told me the hull thing, and just how the play come up about the pocketbook in the wood box. He says the old man claims it's all a bluff that you was held up down there, and you never had no money in the first place. I dunno how he thinks you expected to gain anything by it, though. Neal didn't go into that part of it."

"Say, this sounds pretty darned mysterious to me," Hugh expostulated, looking curiously from one to the other. "That money you was robbed of ain't located, is it? What's it all about, anyway?"

"Bob can tell you as much as I can, probably," Dale put him off with the best grace possible. "It's nothing I could help, but the Burnetts put a wrong construction on what happened, is all, so I felt I couldn't stay any longer and I came up here. If you don't mind getting the story second-hand, Hugh, I think I'll just go in and unpack before dinner."

"Why, sure! Go ahead. I can see why you'd be pretty well fed up on that fifty thousand, but you can't blame us poor guys for likin' to dwell on the subject. It's some consolation to be able to talk about that much money, anyway, even if we never do expect to see more'n six bits at a time." Hugh lowered an eyelid at Bob and laughed as Dale walked off.

But at dinner, having heard all Bob could tell him, Hugh was in no laughing mood, though he waited until the meal was over and they were back in the den before he said anything. Dale wanted to talk polo ponies again, but Hugh, stretching himself in his big leather chair with a mahogany smoking stand at his elbow and a fine old briar pipe going, dismissed that subject with a wave of his hand.

"Look here, Dale, it may not be my put in, and I don't want to talk about it just to be talkin'; but if Bob got it straight, what happened down

to the Bar Seven is pretty gosh-darn serious. I don't believe it oughta be ignored the way you're doing."

"I don't see any use in getting all excited over it, either. Do you?" Dale shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"Well, that's as may be. If it's true they jumped you and—"

"Yes, it's true enough, far as that goes, but Quin seemed to be rather skeptical about the whole thing."

"Yeah; well, he might claim to be—Quin's a whole lot deeper than a person'd think to hear him talk. But the thing that strikes me is this: Why is somebody still after you? I thought you was kiddin' down at Dalton's when you kinda hinted you wasn't robbed so bad, after all. Is it straight that those bandits in Cheyenne didn't get what they came after?" Hugh looked at his pipe, crowded the tobacco down and drew a deep mouthful of smoke. "If they've trailed you off up into this country, it shows they mean business, but if it was me I sure wouldn't overlook the fact; if they're right after you again they won't stop at anything to get what they want."

"Still, I don't see what I can do, more than I'm doing. I'm minding my own business—let them mind theirs."

For a minute Hugh stared then threw back his head and laughed loud and long.

"You tell 'em that, why don't you, next time they jump you for that fortune you packed out here—or was supposed to pack out here? You might be able to talk 'em plumb outa the notion." He chuckled and Dale reluctantly joined in his laughter.

"I didn't mean it quite that way," he explained later, his face growing serious. "But the whole business is getting under my skin, Hugh. I never dreamed money could be such a damned nuisance, but I won't back up on the thing now I've started. Cynthy calls that stubbornness, but that's because she doesn't quite get my point of view. Quin can't seem to, either. He came out flatly and told me he believed I was working for the crowd that's trying to get him."

"What crowd's that?" Hugh asked curiously. "First I ever heard of it."

"Cynthy says he made enemies—something to do with his resigning from the sheriff's office. I suppose that's the crowd he meant."

Hugh shook his head, tapping thoughtfully with his fingers on the foot he had crossed upon his left leg.

"Cynthy might think that, all right; I suppose she does or she wouldn't say it. A man's always

got to give some reason to his women folks that's going to satisfy 'em."

"Then he didn't make any enemies?" Dale frowned at that thought. "In that case, no one would be out to get him, and he would have no excuse for saying what he said to me. That leads me against another blank wall, Hugh."

"I never said Quin didn't have enemies," Hugh said soberly. "He has. But I don't see how they'd make anything by putting up a job on him like that pocketbook. Anyway, the ones that hate Quin the worst ain't the kinda men that'd do a thing like that. They ain't crooks, none of 'em; not as far as I know. They wouldn't be any more liable to steal a pocketbook and put it in his wood box than I would. It's mostly the stockmen that's got it in for him."

"But why? What about that freemasonry of the range you hear so much about? I thought range men all hung together."

"Yeah? Well, they're human, and they're like other folks where their pockets are hit. There's been a lot of rustlin' going on here, same as other places. Not so much the outlaw stuff you say Quin told you about, but calf rustlin' and things like that. Quin was sheriff and the cattlemen naturally expected him to clean it up, and he side-stepped. Always goin' to get out and drag in

the ones that were doing it and never did. Finally they got to crowdin' up on Quin and demandin' protection, and it came to a point where Quin couldn't stall 'em off any longer and he resigned. So the story went around that Quin was standin' in with the cow thieves, and that was why he wouldn't make any arrests.

"We never took any stock in that, of course. Why, we boys used to fairly live at the Bar Seven when we were just kids, and Jim married Rose, the oldest girl. I'd marry Donna too, in a holy minute, if I got the chance, but Quin's kinda soured on the whole bunch of us lately—since he got in bad. We were losing calves right along, same as the rest, and I guess maybe he thought we took sides against him or something. But that's all wrong. We kept our mouths shut; you're the first one I've talked to about it."

"But you don't think there was anything to it, do you?"

Hugh didn't answer at once. His silence was becoming significant when he said reluctantly.

"Well, all I know is, the Bar Seven don't seem to be losing many calves." Hugh got up restlessly, walked to the fireplace and kicked an ember into place, then stood staring down into the flames—Lee Chow having started a fire to take the chill of

Wyoming's evenings off the big room. His face, as Dale watched it, took on a somber expression he had never before seen there. Finally Hugh shrugged away some unwelcome thought and turned back to his chair.

"I'm sorry I said that, Dale," he recanted gravely. "I can't say it ain't the truth, for it is. But what I mean is that I don't want to give you the impression I think Quin's a—crook. I don't; I'm only tellin' you what folks say. But what I believe personally is that he knows—or has got a pretty good idea—who's doin' the dirty work, and won't turn 'em in. Whether they're lettin' the Bar Seven alone for that reason I couldn't say. It's a bad business and I'd rather not talk about it, to tell you the truth. But if you're goin' to locate here—anyway, since you're all up in the air over that money and all, it looks to me like you oughta know how the land lays. I wouldn't want you to do or say anything to hurt Quin—he's Donna's father and Rose's. She's a darn good girl. But Cynthy—"

"You don't think so well of Cynthy?" Dale asked in what he hoped was a casual tone.

"Well, Cynthy'd stick up for the old man, come hell or high water. I ain't sayin' a word against Cynth Burnett, but just the same, there's no limit to what she'd do for Quin, so you got to

take that into consideration when you're dealin' with him. You've got to bear in mind you'll have Cynthy to deal with too."

"I noticed that," Dale said dryly. "So you think perhaps that talk about her father being too good and honest for the job—"

Though Hugh did not reply in words his laugh was mirthlessly eloquent.

"But if he's protecting a bunch of crooks just out of friendship (and what you've told me seems to make that fairly plain), why would they want to get him in bad with that wallet? Or do you think he did have it in his pocket?"

Hugh meditated upon that point, smoking steadily as a man will do, when he is thinking deeply.

"Well, if we knew that, Dale, we wouldn't need to bother about the rest. We'd have the mystery pretty well solved, don't you think?"

"Yes, you're right, of course. But I can't feel that Quin knew anything about the wallet till the squaw laid it down in front of him. I was watching his face, you see. His reaction to it wasn't guilt or even fear. He was just blank, at first, until I told him it was mine. Then it began to get to him—not before."

"Yeah, I don't believe myself he knew about that. I'd say offhand that Quin hates like the

devil to have 'em doggin' you up for that money. But I'll bet just the same he knows more'n he wishes he did about who the gang is, and he's afraid they'll overstep and he can't save 'em. That's the way I'd dope it out."

"I think you're right, at that," Dale agreed unwillingly. "It's a nasty situation and I wish I'd never brought the damn stuff with me. Only for the thought of letting a bunch like that get away with it, I'd rather lose the money and be done with it, if it's going to make trouble for the Burnetts."

Hugh's skeptical grin answered that altruistic statement, and the twinkle in his eyes seemed to hint that he interpreted it as applying more particularly to Cynthy. So Dale withdrew behind his mask of evasiveness and refused to go deeper into the problem that was assuming greater proportions and a graver significance than he had dreamed. Polo talk, he felt, was safer and more satisfactory.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"PRETTY SLICK BUNCH"

POLO talk it was that dominated Dale's dreams that night. He thought he was at a tournament somewhere, playing forward in the last half of a hard-fought game. He was riding one of those bronze bay colts he had seen in Burnett's pasture, coming down the field in a mad dash at Cynthy in her old red sweater, riding Nig. Her horse lumbered along and did not swerve aside as Dale drove at the ball, and the two went down together, one of the horses falling full on Dale's chest, a terrific, smothering weight against which he fought unavailingly. He was heaving and straining to free himself when some one (he thought at the time it was Cynthy) prodded him in the neck with the end of a mallet head and commanded him to lie still. Dale reached up to pull the thing away and felt his hand jerked roughly back—but not before his finger tips had touched the barrel of a six-shooter.

"Lay still or I'll blow your damn head off!" growled the voice again, and Dale abruptly real-

ized that this was not polo and that the voice was not Cynthy's but a man's. He suddenly ceased his struggles and lay very still, except that he did move his head sidewise in an effort to draw a breath of air. He seemed to have a pillow on his face, with some one sitting on the pillow. The effect was intolerably stuffy and uncomfortable.

But presently the weight shifted slightly. A thick, heavy fold of cloth was clapped over his eyes and tied, and a wad of some other cloth was forced between his teeth and his mouth bound shut. By that time he was so greedy for air that he was chiefly concerned with filling his lungs, and when his breathing became normal again, he awoke to the unpleasant fact that he was tied hand and foot, gagged and blindfolded.

As at the falls the other morning, his assailants had been swift and sure in their movements, as if they had had long practise at that kind of work. It did not occur to him that they had acquired that skill in handling calves beside a branding fire, though any Westerner would have known it; he could only marvel at the ease with which they had done the work.

He heard them moving about the room and knew of course what they were after. In a few minutes he heard them leave through the window, with a telltale scraping there as they lifted some-

thing through. Then sounds outside as they cautiously left the house, and soon the subdued movements of horses.

Dale was wide awake now, all dreams of polo swept from his alert brain. But there was nothing he could do, nothing save lie there like a wrapped package and wait for morning. There was no hope of making Hugh hear, for his room was across the big den and his door was probably closed, as was Dale's. Lee Chow did not sleep in the house at all but in a little one-room cabin over beyond the built-on kitchen. The bunk house was some little distance away, as is usually the case on ranches of that type, where the cowboys like to come and go and to make as much noise as they please without disturbing any one in the big house. Unless they heard the men ride away and got up to see, there was little likelihood that they would know anything at all about it. But at that hour of the night even the most wakeful would probably be sound asleep.

The hours dragged blackly along toward daylight. An owl up somewhere on the side hill kept asking "Who? Who? Who?" with a monotonous insistence that nearly drove Dale frantic after the first ten minutes. He wanted to turn over and couldn't, for they had cunningly fastened him to the bedstead lest he throw himself out on the

floor and bring Hugh to investigate the noise. He could only lie there and think, and in that there was no comfort, for he had thought in circles so long that his brain was weary of the mystery. After a long while he dozed a little, to waken in that same bound and bandaged darkness.

Then, away down at the corrals somewhere, two roosters began crowing a duet, baritone and tenor. A cow began bawling mournfully at a distance. Day was begun. Lee Chow arrived in the kitchen and started a fire, Dale judged, from the rattle of stove lids. After an interminable time of cramped muscles and aching jaws some one rapped on his door—whether Hugh or Lee Chow, Dale could not say; he could only lie there and wait, his inarticulate grunts evidently too faint to be heard through the closed door.

Another long season of waiting; Hugh was probably eating breakfast, thinking Dale sound asleep, held by that drowsiness which attacks those brought suddenly into a higher altitude than that to which their bodies are accustomed. True, he had asked Hugh to drag him out at breakfast time, because they had planned a little preliminary schooling of three or four horses he had chosen for his polo string, using a joint of fishing rod to accustom them to the swing and drive of polo sticks. With their eager plans to put in ac-

tion, Hugh would not let him lie long abed, he was sure.

Nor did he. Another half hour and there came a loud rapping and Hugh's voice anathematizing him good-naturedly for his laziness. A moment or two of listening followed, and the door was pushed open.

"Ho-lee *smoke!*" Hugh's voice, sharpened with surprise and consternation, broke the momentary silence. Dale heard him coming in a rush, felt the bandage loosen and lay blinking up into the concerned face bent over him.

"You hurt, Dale?" Hugh was untying the rope as he spoke.

"Unh-unh." Dale gave the negative, American grunt, rubbing his strained jaw muscles with a freed hand. "Got me when I was asleep," he mumbled. "Damn it, Hugh, I've stood all I'm going to from that bunch of crooks!"

"They sure are persistent cusses," Hugh observed, flipping the last knot loose and coiling the rope with mechanical precision. "I never thought they'd have the nerve to tackle you here—they sure want money worse than I do, to take such a chance. What'd they do? Go through your stuff again?"

Dale got up and walked stiffly to the big closet, opened the door and looked in. He turned and

surveyed the room, took long steps to the dresser and yanked a drawer or two open while Hugh watched him.

"They made a good job of it this time," he said flatly. "Cleaned out everything and took it with them." His hands were poking investigatively into the corners of the drawers as he spoke. "Didn't leave so much as a collar button," he finished bitterly. I'll have to borrow some clothes from you, Hugh, or stay in bed."

"Why, sure; anything you want." Hugh was walking around the room, scrutinizing everything in the evident hope of finding some clue. He stopped at the window and leaned with both hands on the sill, staring out.

"They used this window; pretty slick bunch," he said, pulling his head back into the room. "I wondered why it was I never heard anything last night, but on this side of the house there wouldn't be much chance. Wonder how they knew your room. You got any idea, Dale?"

"Saw me when I went to bed, I suppose. I didn't pull down the blinds—never thought of it, out in the country like this, with nothing but a hill outside. Hugh, I'm getting darned tired of being mauled around by those birds! What the devil do they expect to find in my socks and collars and handkerchiefs? I'm going to get after

them myself, now. There's a limit to what I'll stand, and they've passed it."

"But look here, Dale, if you really had that money, they must have got it. They'll leave you alone now."

"I don't care whether they do or not," snapped Dale. "And they're not likely to, for they only got that wallet and what was in it. They didn't get the big roll—that's one comfort." He helped himself to a cigarette from the few scattered on the dresser, lighted it and sat down on the bed, shivering a little in his thin silk pajamas while he glanced sardonically around the room. "Stung!" he grinned sourly. "It helps some to know just how badly they got stung."

"Yeah, only it's a cinch they aren't through with you. They'll sting you yet, unless you can convince 'em somehow that you haven't got any fifty thousand dollars—with you, I mean."

"But I have, and that's the joke," Dale declared looking at Hugh with that sudden widening of his eyes which narrowed to a squint as he smiled. "I'm the only one that can laugh at it so far, but that doesn't spoil it much. I've got that money right where I can put my hands on it whenever I want to."

"The deuce you have! Well, you better not let me know where it is," Hugh advised him, with

mock earnestness, "or you might get to thinking I'd hunt 'em up and put 'em wise."

"No, I'm not telling anybody," Dale replied. "If I keep my own mouth shut, I needn't worry about the other fellow's talking. It's my joke, and when the thing's all over and I've used the money for the purpose I intend, I'll tell you all about it. But you can see yourself—"

"Yeah, but you're overlookin' the fact that the gang you've got on your trail have gone too far to quit."

"Well, so have I gone too far to quit," he retorted. "They can't get away with this, you know —stealing all my clothes except these pajamas I've got on. Polo will have to wait, I'm afraid, till I put these birds where they belong. You know the country, Hugh. Will you help me round them up and get my stuff back?"

"I'll tell the world I will! Nothing I'd like better, old man. Come on and get yourself rigged out. How tall are you? Five ten, or eleven? I'm six feet one-and-a-half. Maybe I can find something of Jim's here. He's about your size."

"I'm six feet," Dale told him, standing his full height. "Able to handle any ordinary man if it comes to a show-down, and that's what riles me so, I guess. They've never given me a chance!"

"Well, I can't blame 'em for that," grinned

Hugh. "What do you think—had we better get the boys on the job and make it a regular posse? I expect they're all at work by this time, but I can catch 'em at noon if you say so."

"I never went trailing bandits," Dale confessed, "but it seems to me we can do better by ourselves. I don't believe there's more than two or three on the job. Couldn't we just make a quiet search until we found them, and then bring in the boys to help capture the gang? That's the method they use in the city, you know; shadow your men and get them located, then make a raid when they least expect it. You must know about where they'd take my stuff. Let's go there."

Hugh, leaning into a closet and pulling out clothing rather promiscuously, laughed tolerantly at that.

"That shows how much you don't know about this country. I've got a hunch they'd ride on down Dugout, or maybe over into Hungry Hollow—but that don't help us out much. We might ride that country for a month and never see hide nor hair of 'em, even if they're in there. And then there's the country all in around Haystack Butte; that's another robbers' roost kinda country. And Yellow Peak—all in back of there they could hole up.

"Here's a pair of breeches Jim left, and that

dresser over there has got his shirts and things. Help yourself, and if that ain't enough dig into mine. I'll go have Lee Chow fix you some breakfast, and then we'll get out and see what we can dig up in the shape of clues. We might be able to find tracks that'd tell us something."

They did find tracks under the window of Dale's room. The ground was loose and sandy there, and it had been trodden so full of footmarks there might have been almost any number of men entering the house and departing that way. Riding boots had been worn, but there were no distinguishing traces in any of the prints, which were blurred and worthless for measurements or any other approved method of identification. It seemed to Dale that only a detective of fiction could have made anything of the mess, and that their only hope of finding any clue lay in looking farther afield.

But of one thing they convinced themselves before the day was over. Trunk, suit cases and all had been carried bodily away from the ranch, and this time there was no attempt to return the things by leaving them in a neat pile on a rock where they were sure to be found.

"All we've got to show for it is the rope they tied you up with," Hugh complained that night over their after-dinner smokes. "They used my

towels for the gag and to blindfold you, so there's no chance there. Just the rope—and a rope's a rope; you can't make anything else of it. It ain't even a good one, Dale. Looks to me like somebody's old picket rope, the way it's frayed and all."

"That's for you to say; I don't know anything about ropes. I wonder if the boys might possibly have seen or heard anything last night. Maybe we should have asked them, Hugh. Of course, I want this kept as quiet as possible, but still we mustn't shut off any possible sources of information."

"We didn't. I told the boys I thought I heard some one riding past the house last night, and kinda wondered who it was. There's no place to go above here, you know, except into the wildest kind of country. The road stops at our upper pasture, as you saw for yourself. Well, none of the boys heard a thing. I didn't think it was likely they would, because nobody would be fool enough to ride down past the bunk house. They'd take that upper trail where we rode. But I wanted to be sure we didn't overlook any bets."

"Just the same," Dale said doggedly, "it's strange we could find no fresh tracks leaving the place here. I don't understand that at all."

"No, and they didn't mean for you to under-

stand. My theory is that maybe they came down off the hill afoot, and packed the stuff back that way. To-morrow, maybe we'd better ride around the other side of the hill and see if we can find where they left their horses. It'll be about ten miles—that's the way this country is, up here. They could leave their horses back over the hill and walk across, maybe half or three-quarters of a mile. But it would take all of an hour's hard riding to make it on horseback."

"Still, it doesn't look so terribly steep," Dale argued. "We rode worse hills to-day, it seems to me."

"It's ledgy, all up above here, and there are patches of shale you couldn't get a horse over. And what looks to you here like stony ground is broken-up rock that a horse would slip and break his leg on. It just ain't ridable, that's all."

"I wouldn't think in that case it would be walkable, either," Dale retorted. "Especially in the dark."

Hugh shook his head at that. "Anything's walkable," he declared sententiously, "if you think there's fifty thousand dollars at the end of the walk!"

All at once Dale leaned back in his chair and gave a loud ha-ha.

"Think of them sweating up that hill in the

dark, carrying all that luggage, just for what I had in my pocket!" he grinned in explanation afterwards.

"Yeah, that is funny, all right, but I wouldn't laugh, if I were you," Hugh said soberly. "I expect they're about in the mood now to kill you for that!"

"If killing would get them the money," Dale conceded, still chuckling. "But even such morons as they appear to be must see the futility of anything so extreme."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WHAT HAPPENED AT GREY BULL

To begin with, the horse Hugh wanted Dale to ride was not with the others next morning, and since Hugh was rather set in his ways once he had decided upon a certain thing, he told Dale to stay at the house and wait for him while he went after the horse. Dale protested on the ground that any good saddle horse would do just as well, but Hugh refused to see it in that light.

"No, you've got to ride Meeker, and that's all there is to it," he said. "He's the best hill horse on the ranch, and we might get into rough country. You couldn't lose Meeker—if we got separated or anything, he'd bring you back in daylight or dark. It won't take long, and the time we'll lose in starting we can make up by having the right horses under us. I'll be back in a little bit."

So off he went, galloping down the twisty, hard-beaten cow path along the creek, and Dale was left inwardly fuming but outwardly calm enough and yielding good-naturedly to Hugh's whim, as he mentally dubbed it. As a matter of fact, to

wear borrowed clothes irked Dale more than he would have dreamed it could, and the robbery of all his personal belongings loomed as large in his resentment as losing the fifty thousand would have done; though he recognized the inconsistency of that attitude sufficiently to hide it as well as he could from Hugh.

But the delay seemed worth while to him, after all, for here came Cynthy on a spirited black not in the least like the long-headed, loose-lipped Nig, and the first thought that darted through Dale's perturbed mind was a thankfulness that he had not missed her. Cynthy's face, too, showed unmistakable relief when she saw him standing on the porch and she reined that way. But when she brought her horse to a stand her manner was noncommittal in the extreme. She greeted him with a casual hello and asked for Hugh.

"He's down in the pasture somewhere, after a horse for me," Dale told her, instinctively approaching the magnificent animal she bestrode. "Golly, he's a beauty, Cynthy! Where did you have him concealed while I was down there? I don't suppose he'd be for sale, would he?"

"I should say not! He's Father's own special idol, and I only ride him when I have a chance to sneak away."

Dale was rubbing the sleek neck under the silky

mane and he noted that, cool as was the morning, his hand came away wet. But then, he thought swiftly, that might be because the horse was a bit soft from lack of exercise and was sweating easily; or had Cynthy ridden in haste for some reason?

"Where are you and Hugh going?" Cynthy asked abruptly, with a curious sharpness in her voice.

"Bandit hunting," he told her, with self-conscious cheerfulness. "This time they forgot to return my clothes. I'm wearing brother Jim's for the present, and they don't fit any too well."

"Oh!" Cynthy sat frowning down at him. "You discovered then, that even up here you weren't immune!" She sent a swift comprehensive glance around the yard. "Just how and when did it happen, Dale?"

Something in her tone, her sudden, unexpected return to the familiarity of using his given name, brought a warmth and a heady excitement to Dale's spirits. He forgot to wonder what had brought her up to the Mowerby ranch so early in the morning, forgot the bitterness of their argument over his troublesome affairs. He told her in detail just what had happened and showed her the trampled spot under his window and the rope with which he had been tied.

They had just returned to where her horse stood pawing impatiently and circling the tree where Cynthy had tied him, when Hugh appeared at the corral leading a tall buckskin. He saw them and came on at a sharp gallop.

"Hello, Cynth! What you out so early for? Anything wrong down at your place?"

"Hello, Hugh! No, not a thing. Father and Donna went to town again, and I thought I'd bring up a note Donna wrote you—and take that fishing trip with Dale I promised him. I beat it up here early, so I'd catch you fellows at home—and it looks as if I wasn't any too soon, either."

Hugh sent a quick glance toward Dale, who was staring at Cynthy. Until that minute she had not said a word about going fishing, nor about anything else, really. She had seemed tense, worried, apprehensive about something, but beyond curt questions concerning the robbery she had said very little.

"Didn't he tell you where we're going?" Hugh asked curiously, taking the note which Cynthy held out to him.

"Oh, yes, bandit hunting! But that can wait, can't it? Or at any rate we can combine business with pleasure, and fish while we hunt bandits. I've got a lunch, but if you're going to butt in on

the party, Hugh, you'd better have Lee put up some more sandwiches."

Hugh was looking from the note to Cynthy and scowling a little, evidently in some doubt over a question that needed to be settled.

"That's up to Dale," he said, trying to put her off. "They're his bandits, not mine. But the fishin's pretty punk where we're going, Cynth. Up around the big hill here; it's dry as a bone and you know it."

"Oh, well, have it your way," Cynthy yielded sweetly. "If Dale wants to hunt bandits to-day, all right, we'll hunt bandits. We can fish any other day, I suppose."

"But don't you think it would be pretty rough work for a girl?" Dale ventured, trying desperately to guess what she wanted him to say.

"Not for this girl, as you'll learn for yourself if you stay long enough. Are you coming along, Hugh?"

"Why, sure, if it's the bandits you're going after. You folks would get plumb lost without me. Did Dale tell you how they cleaned out his room night before last?"

"He started to, yes. You can fill in the horrible details as we go along. Better get some more lunch from Lee Chow, and let's go. Never yet have I

hunted bandits, and I've lived here right in the middle of their secret haunts for twenty-one years. As Donna says, I'm simply gasping for the sight of one on his native heath."

This was a Cynthy utterly strange to Dale and he even caught Hugh eyeing her questioningly when he thought she was not looking.

"This might not pan out so funny after all, Cynth," Hugh warned her. "There's liable to be some shooting, if we run across the bunch that took Dale's stuff."

"Well, well!" Cynthy made ironical comment. "You're killing time right now, Hugh—and that's about as savage as you'll be, I expect. Go saddle Meeker, and I'll see about the sandwiches myself. About all we'll find is a track, maybe—but I expect I can get a thrill out of a bandit track; I've never seen one yet to know it."

There was no stopping Cynthy or any other girl in that mood. While Hugh saddled Meeker she interviewed Lee Chow to her satisfaction and she seemed intent on making a picnic of the trip. She swept them along almost as if they had not made any plans at all for the day and were simply going because she wanted them to and because she had never trailed bandits and thought it would be a new and fascinating game. But Hugh, who had

found time to read Donna's note, responded rather absently to her teasing chatter.

"Say, what took your dad back to town all of a sudden?" he demanded at last. "Donna wrote as if it was a hurry-up call of some kind. What was it, anyway?"

"Oh, Rose sent up word that she wanted to come home, and asked Father to come after her. And Donna went along just to be doing something, I guess. Mother didn't want her to go, but Donna can't be annoyed with parents' wishes, these days. She's got a lot out of college so far, I must say. I think I'll try a term or two and see what it will do for me."

But Hugh, leading the way up along the base of the bold hill they meant to investigate, was not to be diverted in that fashion.

"What did she mean by 'Hell to pay in town and I'm going with Dad?' " he persisted, turning in the saddle to give Cynthy a questioning stare. "What's the trouble, Cynth?"

"Oh, you are so archaic, Hugh! Haven't you learned the college girl's vocabulary yet? Everything's 'hell to pay,' according to Donna this summer. Mother's half frantic over the language her baby girl uses." And Cynthy laughed after the manner of one who recalls certain amusing incidents not generally known.

"I never noticed her talking so much different," Hugh said uneasily. "Anything wrong with Rose?"

"Not that I know of," Cynthy answered him lightly. "They were coming up the Fourth, anyway, you know—"

"And that's two weeks off. I wanted to bring Rose up here and she had forty reasons for not coming then. Is—" he bit his lip "—is it Jim?"

"Is what Jim?" Cynthy's black horse took a dancing step or two sideways and it took a half minute to quiet him again and bring him back to a more sedate pace behind Hugh. "Don't be fussy," she mocked him then. "You always are, where Jim is concerned, I notice. And that's funny too, when one thinks of how he always used to bully you and boss you around here at the ranch. Do you remember the time you came boiling down to our place and wanted Father to come up here and arrest Jim for taking your saddle horse and claiming it was his?" She laughed, her glance going to Dale who had ridden up alongside. "They used to fight all the time," she declared. "It took us half our time to patch up their quarrels, it seems to me. But now it's just the other way round. I don't believe there's a week goes by that Hugh doesn't find some excuse for going to town—just to see Jim, I firmly believe. Only,"

she added, "he wouldn't admit it, of course."

"What's got into you to-day, Cynth?" Hugh retorted gruffly. "You trying to start something with me?"

"You're in one of your moods, I guess. I haven't done anything to you; have I, Dale?"

But Dale confined his answer to a shake of the head. Until he knew what Cynthy had in her mind, he felt that silence was probably the best assistance he could give her. She had something, he was sure. She had not come up to go fishing with him, and she was not bubbling over with good spirits, as a stranger would have assumed. True, she bubbled, but it was a deliberate manner assumed for some purpose of her own. Dale had studied Cynthy's face too often not to feel worried now in a vague indefinite way. Hugh, too, was betraying a certain disquiet induced either by Cynthy's presence and determination to go with them or by Donna's note; possibly by both, Dale thought, as he watched him. And since the two seemed on the brink of quarreling over nothing, he touched Meeker with his spurs and rode up alongside Hugh, forcing Cynthy to follow along behind; a rudeness which he sought to condone with a little shake of the head and a smile meant to convey understanding and sympathy together.

The way grew rougher and soon they were riding in single file with Hugh leading the way, all semblance of a trail vanishing as they entered a rough canyon, where they must pick their way carefully between scattered boulders and through thorny thickets. Even Hugh showed an unfamiliarity with certain rocky gulches, more than once being compelled to turn back and seek another way.

"I called it ten miles around this hill, didn't I, Dale?" he grinned once, when they had stopped in the shade of an overhanging cliff to rest for a minute. "I thought I could cut off a little and save time, seein' we were held up at the start." He sent an oblique glance at Cynthy, who wrinkled her nose at him for answer. "But I wish now we'd taken down along the creek and swung in behind old Baldtop about where Grey Bull heads into Dugout. We'd 'a' made time doing it, though it's farther that way.

"Well, let's go. We can edge around these gullies and cut through over that ridge up there and get onto Grey Bull and follow along it. There's a kinda trail, soon as we get over there."

Cynthy's merry-making mood had dropped from her in the last scrambling half mile. She looked up at the bald hill above them, then straight at Hugh.

"But what's the idea of coming up here at all?" she demanded, in her direct way of driving straight for her object. "Why do you think Dale's bandits went this way? Have you got any kind of a clue, or are you just riding at random?"

"Both, maybe," Hugh replied. "We're followin' what your dad would call a process of elimination. We proved to our own satisfaction they didn't go any other way, so we decided they came down off the hill afoot. We're goin' to see if we can't pick up the trail the other side of the hill, and if we can, we'll follow it from where they left their horses."

"Oh, I see," said Cynthy, in the tone of one who doesn't see at all. "All around Robin Hood's barn. But if you wanted to do all that, why didn't you take the trail over to the head of Grey Bull and come down that way? You know perfectly well—"

"Sure, I know a lot of things, Cynth; how you like to boss the job, for one thing. I went this way because there's a chance we might pick up their trail quicker along Grey Bull. They wouldn't go up the creek; you must know that much. It ain't fishing we're after, Cynth, it's bandits."

"I suppose," said Cynthy with much sarcasm, "the fish can't swim down stream. I've caught

thousands in upper Grey Bull; what's the matter with it lower down?"

"Not a darn thing except rock walls forty or fifty feet high," Hugh told her blandly. "I expect there's trout enough if you could get to them; but you can't, so that settles the fishing question."

Apparently it settled Cynthy also, for she said no more and followed Hugh's lead without question or comment when he set out again, doggedly making the best of the bad going ahead of them. Eventually they reached a barren saddle of rock which gave a magnificent view of the rugged country to the north and south, but showed little hope of an easy way down. They pulled their panting horses to a willing stand and gazed around in almost dismayed silence.

"Well, I'll be darned!" Hugh said, after a minute. "I guess I swung too far to the left; took the wrong gulch somewhere. Now we'll have to walk and lead our horses down."

"Well," said Cynthy, "I did think you knew where you were going, Hugh. Born and raised in this country—"

"Yeah, throw it into me, Cynth! I've known your dad gettin' lost up in here, and he's been in the country longer than I have. And I ain't lost, far as that goes. I know about where we are;

all I got to do now is hunt the easiest way down to where we can pick up the Grey Bull trail. See that creek down there? That's Grey Bull."

"I wish I were in it," Cynthy gloomily observed. "I'm perishing for a drink. Come on, then. Lead on, Hugh—we'll follow."

"Now here," said Hugh, a weary half-hour later, "is what I was aimin' for all along. See that green spot down there? That's where the trail strikes off up the creek, and there's a good spring and grass and shade. You two go on down there and rest yourselves, and I'll scout around up above here and see if I can pick up any sign."

"And what about the bandits?" Cynthy inquired. "If we see them—"

"You won't. Tracks is all we expect to see over here." And Hugh rode off along the slope, aiming for a point where they could see the trail faintly marked where it crossed a little ridge.

The two watched him out of sight in one of those numberless little gullies before they started on toward the vivid green spot he had pointed out to them. It was not far and even Dale had reached the point where the prospect of a shady spot beside a spring assumed a vast importance. Since they left the ranch he had been waiting for a chance to ask Cynthy what was the matter, and why she had thrust herself into the affair so de-

terminedly, but now that they were alone together, he concerned himself only with reaching the spring as soon as possible.

"Isn't this heavenly?" Cynthy exclaimed, when they dismounted beside a small, clear pool half covered with watercress. "I can forgive Hugh a lot for leading us to this spot. We'll eat our lunch here, even though it's early. Aren't you starved?"

She got no answer and turned to see why. Dale was staring incredulously into the muzzle of a six-shooter held by a man with hat pulled low over his eyebrows and his neckerchief drawn across his nose for a mask. While she looked, another man stepped out of the bushes behind Dale and dropped a looped rope over his head and shoulders, pulling it tight with a quick yank and winding it expertly round and round him.

Cynthy gave a cry of protest and reached for the revolver tucked inside her belt; and as she did so, her arms were gripped from behind, though she fought furiously, kicking at booted shins and trying her best to bite her captor. A fourth man caught her hands and tied them with cruel effectiveness and she was pulled to a near-by tree and tied there with her arms behind her.

Dale too had kicked out at the man with the gun, trying to defend himself from the onslaught. But as twice before, the surprise had been com-

plete. They had him trussed and tied to a tree a short distance from Cynthy, and all he could do was gaze miserably at her plight and rack his brains for some way of warning Hugh before he too rode into the trap.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"YOU'LL TELL, ALL RIGHT!"

THE man with the gun apparently guessed his intention, for he pulled his blue bandanna from his pocket and gagged Dale with that swift and careless precision which betrays perfect familiarity with the work. Then he turned to those who had caught Cynthy.

"Tie a gag over her mouth so she can't holler," he commanded curtly, "and then get out up the trail after the other feller. Here, Jack, you mount guard, and I'll go along and see that these two bone-heads don't fall down on their job."

A vague sense of something familiar in the voice grew in Dale's mind to a certainty. His memory flashed a picture of the moonlit mountains across the valley from Dalton's and the rider by the gate, motioning him into the shadows that they might not be seen from the house. Bill and Jack, without a doubt; bandits just as he had at first surmised, when he saw them ride up that night. He looked across at Cynthy and saw her

gaze following the movements of the two, and as she glanced toward Dale and saw him looking at her, she tilted her head toward the departing Bill and nodded.

Cynthy also recognized him, then. Dale glanced at Jack, who was regarding the two with interest. Evidently Jack had caught and understood the wordless interchange of meaning, for he pulled his mask from his face and proceeded calmly to roll a cigarette.

"I told Bill you'd know us both," he remarked to Cynthy, as he lighted a match. "We never expected you'd buy into this, but it ain't goin' to alter our plans none. We decided that when we seen you through the glasses, ridin' down the hill. You're into it, and you'll have to take your medicine and like it." He pulled his neckerchief around, with the point draped over his shoulder so that it would not flap in his face and he could smoke in peace. "I guess it ain't as heavenly as you thought it was goin' to be, when you got off your horse," he added with a grin and a wink at Dale.

But Dale only glared in response. It was maddening to be able to do nothing else, and the handkerchief bound tightly over his mouth smelled abominably of tobacco. Moreover, Cynthy was thirsty and to be tied there beside that limpid pool

of water, with the spring bubbling out from a rocky bank within six feet of where she stood must add much to her parched longing for a drink. For himself it didn't matter so much; the agony lay in knowing Cynthy's distress.

She didn't seem frightened, though. Her eyes snapped with anger when she looked at Jack now reclining at his ease on the bank of the pool, his gun within easy reach of his hand—though they were absolutely helpless and harmless—and the smoke of his cigarette whipping away from his face, which showed a certain nervousness, belying his tone of lazy amusement.

"We had to shut your mouths for yuh, so you wouldn't holler and put Hugh Mowerby wise to our bein' here," he rambled on, very much as if the silence and their baleful gaze disturbed him somehow. "Soon as they git here, Bill'll likely take off them gags. In fact, I know he will; he'll want you to tell us where you got that money hid." His glance rested speculatively upon Dale.

"We ain't goin' to hurt yuh none—either of yuh," he went on droningly. "Not unless you git mean about tellin' us what we want to know, and I guess you got more sense'n to do a thing like that. It ain't as if you needed that money yourself; you don't or you wouldn't take the chances with it you do. You prob'ly got more'n you know

what to do with, and it ain't no more'n right you should give it up to them that can use it. Just packin' it around playin' the fool with it is no way to do; no way at all. It's just givin' us a dare to come and git it—and we don't take no such a dare as that. So it's your own fault if you're tied up. Yours too, Cynthy, for comin' along where you'd no business."

Cynthy stamped her foot at him and shook her head in violent denial, and for answer to that Jack grinned as he picked up a pebble the size of a robin's egg and flipped it in her direction. He might have been any cowboy friend teasing her, just to see what she would do, and for a minute Dale had a wild suspicion that this was some elaborate hoax being played on him as a tenderfoot in the country. It could be; he had heard and read of such practical jokes.

But when he looked at Cynthy his spirits fell once more into foreboding. She must be horribly afraid, though she was too game to show it, and there could be no joking about the way she was tied to that tree. The savage tightness of the rope proved their real purpose. They meant to have the money—and with that thought Dale's teeth clamped together beneath the bandage across his mouth.

Just then Bill returned, marching Hugh before

him at the point of his gun, one of the other men leading Hugh's horse. These still wore their masks and their eyes shining out of that narrow space between hat brim and cloth looked cold as the unblinking stares of snakes. Bill looked at the three, chose a tree facing them for Hugh and tied him there roughly.

Hugh's hat was off and his face was pale under his tan, his reddish-brown hair straggling down into his haggard eyes. Dale could even see him trembling and the sight somehow stiffened his own courage. If Hugh's nerve was already deserting him, all the more reason why Dale should show plenty of courage. They wouldn't hurt Hugh or Cynthy, he felt certain of that. It was that fifty thousand dollars they were after and he was the only one who knew where it was. They'd bully him, probably, and try to scare him into giving it up—but if he yielded without a struggle every one—Cynthy especially—would call him a coward. It was the presence of Cynthy that braced him for the coming conflict of wills.

Bill went over and took the gag off Cynthy, who had been eyeing him fixedly.

"Aren't you hot in that mask, Bill Bradley?" she asked. "It's so silly—unless you're keeping your face covered because you're ashamed of yourself. In that case, I'd go on wearing it."

"Don't get smart," Bill warned her, yanking down the handkerchief mask as he walked over to Dale. "You're the guy I want to hear talk," he said roughly, removing the smelly gag.

"All right," Dale answered him with forced civility, "I'll talk after you give Miss Burnett a drink of water. I suppose I can't expect that you'll untie her just yet."

"You sure can't," Bill replied positively. "Not till after we've had our little talk, anyway. Jack, you can give her a drink. We don't wanta be any tougher than we have to be."

"That's fine," Dale remarked with bland approval.

"Dale, I never dreamed they were camped here when I sent you two down to wait for me," Hugh protested earnestly. "I wouldn't have had this happen for anything in the world."

"I know you wouldn't, old man. It's just one of life's little ironies, I guess. Brace up, Hugh."

"That's easy to say," Hugh muttered. "But when I see what I let you in for—" he broke off, biting his lips to hold himself steady.

Over across the little pool Cynthy raised her mouth from the tomato can of water Jack was holding for her to drink from, and looked at Hugh.

"Why take that view of it? He's let himself in

for it," she said, with an I-told-you-so glance toward Dale. "We're made the goats just because we happened to be along. He got himself into this mess—let him get out the best way he can." She sent a quick look around the little group and bent her face again to the can.

"That's the stuff—put the blame where it belongs, on him," Bill approved. "And just for that, you can have your hands free to hold a sandwich. I heard yuh say something awhile ago about bein' hungry."

"Thanks, Bill. The lunch is in that package tied to my saddle horn. Do you think we'll be held very long? If we are, I wish you'd put me over at that other tree where the rock is. It's tiresome standing up all the while." Cynthy's little smile was irresistible and Bill yielded, apologizing with ungrammatical sincerity because he could not leave her altogether free.

"I really don't mind very much, so long as I'm comfortable," she told him cheerfully, smiling up into Bill's face as he laid the package of food in her lap. "Now go ahead and ask Mr. Emery where he keeps his money, and let's get it over with. I'm dying to know."

The relieved look on Dale's face when he saw her made comfortable darkened to anger and suspicion. It began to look very much like a put-up

job between Bill and Cynthy. Was that why she had hurried up to Hugh's place so early in the morning? If they hadn't been ready to start out, she might have proposed the trip herself. Certainly she did not seem in the least perturbed now —and if Cynthy really did know about it beforehand, that would account for Jack's teasing mood while he waited for Hugh to be brought in. Dale looked at Hugh and unconsciously his eyes softened. Hugh was still pale and worried, little beads of perspiration standing out on his forehead, which looked white as a girl's where his hat had protected it from the sun. This hold-up might have been planned, but if so Hugh most assuredly was not in on the joke.

"Yeah, so am I dyin' to know where that fifty thousand bucks is cached," Jack spoke eagerly. The two strangers kept on their masks and refrained from taking any part in the conversation; Dale guessed that they meant to remain as inconspicuous as possible, in the hope that they could not be identified afterwards, if things went wrong.

"That's what we all want to know, I guess," said Bill. "You look like you've got some sense; tell us where we'll find the money and we'll turn yuh loose—if you don't lie about it."

They waited. Dale did not reply. He was too

bitterly disappointed in Cynthy to make any retort, and as for giving them any satisfaction concerning the money, he felt that he would rather be shot.

"Well, ain't yuh going to tell us where it is?" Bill asked trenchantly.

"No, I'm not," said Dale quietly.

"Say, I guess you don't realize just what you're up against," Bill observed. "I'd a lot rather you told now than after awhile."

"Oh, go on and tell us, Dale; you've kept us guessing long enough!" Cynthy urged, still trying to be light and inconsequential, as if it were just a game they were playing, but with a betraying note of hysteria in her voice.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Miss Burnett, but I'm afraid you'll just have to keep on guessing," Dale answered her coldly. "You folks are going the wrong way about it."

"Yeah, I kinda think you're right," Bill retorted with ominous meaning. "Bring the rope off that saddle, Jack."

"Dale, you'd better tell 'em where it is," Hugh said, running the tip of his tongue across his dry lips. "No use crowdin' your luck. They won't stop at anything."

"Are you standing in with them—like Cynthy?" Dale came back at him harshly.

"Say, don't be a damn' fool!" Hugh exclaimed resentfully.

Bill had taken the rope from his companion and was pulling out the loop with a brisk, businesslike manner more menacing than threats. Now he walked up and placed the loop over Dale's head, looking up to seek a convenient limb. There happened to be one growing out from the tree, and he stood back and threw the coil over with a neat cast, catching the rope as it swung down over the branch. Hand over hand he took in the slack until the loop pulled snugly around Dale's throat.

"Now I give yuh one more chance to come clean," Bill said, in a hard voice. "Don't be so damn' stingy with your money. Tell us where you hid that fifty thousand dollars." As he spoke, he untied the rope which bound Dale to the tree so that he stood with only his hands tied behind him and the rope around his neck. "Come on, jar loose from that information."

"Why are you so sure I've got that much money?"

"Why would you go on riskin' your hide, claimin' you've got it if you ain't?" Bill turned and beckoned the two silent ones to lend a hand on the rope, and they trotted up willingly enough, the corners of their masks flapping in the breeze.

Bill waited another minute, his eyes searching Dale's stubborn, contemptuous face; and then stepped backward, the rope taut in his two gloved hands, the other two pulling as he pulled. There was a sickening, straining wrench at Dale's throat as the rope drew tighter and tighter and his weight left his feet. He shut his eyes then to keep out the look of horror growing in Cynthy's face, and dangled with his toes just brushing the grass as the wind swung him gently to and fro.

With a rush he felt the blood settling in his face, felt the straining pressure behind his eyeballs. His head seemed to swell and he grew slightly giddy. Then, when it seemed as though his lungs would burst in their yearning for air, his feet came down solidly upon the ground and Bill's fingers were loosening the rope. Dale tried not to gasp or to give any sign of distress, but he felt himself swaying, felt some one steadying him.

"Where is it?" Bill's voice cut harshly through the drumming in his ears.

Dale stared unyieldingly into a pair of eyes absolutely merciless in the fixed determination that looked out of them.

"You goin' to tell?"

"No!"

"Aw, tell 'em, Dale!" Hugh implored. "What's fifty thousand dollars, anyway?"

"No!" Dale's stubborn rage had passed the point where he could yield. "No! You'll never get it—not if you kill me!"

"We'll kill yuh, all right, if you don't tell," Bill promised him grimly, and began to walk backward again with the rope.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"THEY WON'T HURT HER—"

AGAIN the horrible strain, the agonizing moment when his feet left the ground. Again he shut his eyes and lips and hung on to his reeling senses. Again the starting eyeballs, the horrible suffocation—and Cynthy's voice screaming at them to stop.

When his feet struck the ground after this torture, his knees buckled and he would have fallen on his face if the rope had not checked him with a lurch that seemed almost to dislocate his neck. He must have missed a minute or two there, for the next he realized distinctly was Cynthy's sobbing remonstrance and Hugh's voice cutting in with cursing.

"Let him go!" Hugh was shouting hoarsely. "You'll kill him, you damn' fools! You want to hang for murder? Let him go, I tell yuh!"

"Aw, shut up!" Bill savagely commanded. "You'll be speakin' outa turn if you ain't careful. Didn't I say he'd tell? Well, he'll do it before I'm through."

"You—you fiends!" shrieked Cynthy, over and over again in frantic protest. "Take this rope off me! Let me go to him! Oh, you've killed him! Let me go!"

Dale opened his bloodshot eyes and stared up into the faces of all four of the gang bending over him.

"You goin' to tell where that money is?" Bill asked remorselessly.

"No!" Dale gasped thickly. "Damn you—a thousand times—*no!*"

"Let him go, you fellows!" Hugh's voice was harsh with emotion, his face looked drawn and old when Dale, helped to a sitting posture with his back against the tree, looked over that way. "Can't you see he means it? Turn him loose. Either he ain't got the money—"

"Shut up!" Bill wheeled upon him angrily. "I'm runnin' this show. You keep your nose outa this, or we'll put you over the jumps yourself."

"Like hell you will! Turn him loose, I tell yuh! He's got you stopped, Bill. If he won't tell now, nothing'll make him."

"Say, where'd you get all that? Maybe if we string *you* up a time or two, he'll change his mind!"

"You try that once!" Hugh shouted defiantly. "You just try it, that's all!"

Bill, wrought up to a high pitch of savagery by his failure, was walking toward him. Now his fist smashed full into Hugh's face, and a spurt of blood from Hugh's nose followed the blow.

"Oh, you coward!" cried Cynthy, straining at the rope. "What a coward you are, Bill Bradley!" Bill wheeled and advanced upon her, scowling blackly.

"You shut up or you'll get it next," he cried angrily. "I'm goin' to get the truth out of that guy there if I have to kill the bunch of yuh by inches!"

"Go after the girl, then," one of the masked men muttered. "That'll make him talk!"

"Damn you, leave her alone!" croaked Dale, staring groggily at Cynthy. "I haven't got the money, if you want to know."

"Now I *know* you're lyin'," Bill retorted slightingly. "Come over here, Jack." He crooked his finger and Jack obeyed. The two walked off and conferred together up the trail, where the bushes screened them from view.

Hugh, shaking the blood from his face, was making a desperate effort to free one hand while the masked bandits watched him with stolid interest, when Bill returned and walked up to Dale.

"You're goin' to tell where that money is," he stated firmly. "You've got nerve, I'll hand yuh that much—but I bet you ain't got so much nerve

where Cynthy Burnett is concerned. You tell right now, or I'm goin' to start in on her. *And don't think I won't!*" he finished with baleful intensity.

"Don't you do it, Dale," cried Cynthy. "He's only bluffing you now—and the more he threatens, the less he means it. Bill worked for us once—why, he wouldn't *dare* touch me! He knows Father'd kill him if he did. Don't you tell them a thing!"

While Dale stared at her dubiously, Bill walked back to where she sat.

"You're comin' with me up the trail a ways," he said, with a ruthless kind of calm. "If you think I won't do anything to you, you're crazy, that's all."

"It's you that are crazy," she retorted, refusing to take him seriously. "Dale, he's bluffing; don't pay any attention to what he says. He wouldn't hurt me—"

"Say, don't you fool yourself!" Bill snorted, as he tied her hands behind her again. "I'd hurt anybody for fifty thousand dollars!" And he began to half lead and half carry her up the trail to where Jack waited mysteriously, Cynthy fighting and kicking and threatening as they disappeared.

"For God's sake, *tell* 'em, why don't you? You

rich fellows—money's your God! You'd see 'em torture a woman to death before you'd let loose of a dollar!" Hugh burst out and cursed Dale fiercely.

"They won't hurt her—she knows they won't hurt her," Dale declared, muttering the words to himself. "They can't get away with this—I can't let them get away with it. She told me not to. They'll give up when they find they can't bluff me—I'd be a fool to give in now."

"*Tell* 'em! Tell 'em where it is!" Hugh reiterated over and over, between oaths. "Why didn't you tell in the first place? They'll get it anyway."

"No!" barked Dale. "She knows they're bluff—" The word froze on his lips as a piercing shriek from Cynthy shattered the ominous silence in the thicket where they had taken her.

"Dale! *Help!* Oh, Dale, Dale!" she sobbed; and again the shrieking, inarticulate scream, prolonged, terrible.

"*Stop it!*" yelled Dale, writhing in his bonds. "I'll tell—I'll tell—stop it!"

Bill appeared swiftly, alone. He stood before Dale, looking down at him with a wry smile.

"I thought that'd jar yuh some," he said laconically. "Where is it?"

"Bring her back here and I'll tell. You dam-

nable fiend!" snarled Dale between clenched teeth.

"You tell, and I'll bring her back," Bill calmly reversed the condition. "I guess you know now that when I say a thing I mean it. Where's that money?"

"Pressed in the binding of my books," said Dale, panting a little after the strain. "Now, go bring her back here!"

"You lie," Bill accused him grimly. "We cut them red books to pieces, and there wasn't a damn thing in the covers but pasteboard. *Where's that money?* And I ain't goin' to ask yuh again," he added bodefully.

"You got the wrong books," Dale explained, for the first time seeing nothing to smile over in the thought. "The money's in the three books I let Cynthy keep for me."

"I'll be damned!" breathed Bill, staring oddly. "So that's it." Then a thought struck him. "Cynthy know that?" he snapped.

"No, nobody knew it. That's why—I felt safe." He looked up tensely into Bill's face. "Now, damn you, bring her back!" he cried insistently.

Bill stood thoughtfully rubbing his chin while he stared down at Dale.

"Yeah, I guess that's right," he decided. "That's the only place it could be. I didn't know

there was any more books," he added apologetically, as if he must explain his failure. "Sure, I'll bring her back. Hey, Jack!" he shouted. "Bring her back—he come through, all right!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SOLD

WITH a terrible anxiety, Dale watched for her return. In the name of heaven, what had they done to her? What had they dared? Was she injured? If she was, he ought to be shot for bringing this upon her. The money didn't mean anything at all to him now, nor his pride in keeping it in spite of their cunning and their brutality. Measured against Cynthy's safety and welfare, it was less than nothing. He did not know how white and shaken he looked, nor did he feel the tears on his cheeks when Cynthy came with a swift little rush and knelt beside him.

"Oh, I didn't mean to, Dale! I didn't mean to scream!" she cried, catching him by the shoulders and pulling him close. "I thought they wouldn't do anything—but they dragged a—*snake* across my neck! And they had me blindfolded, Dale! They said it was a—a rattlesnake—oh, Dale dear, I—I can't *bear* snakes near me! And Bill knew it—"

"Yeah, only it wasn't a snake, it was a rope," Bill grinned.

"You brute! You said it was a snake! Oh Dale, did you tell really? I—I—" Cynthy, the self-possessed, was sobbing like a little child, her face hidden against Dale's shoulder.

"Don't cry, dear," Dale muttered brokenly, his lips against her hot cheek. "I was a fool from the start—but if you can forgive me—"

"Oh, it's *my* fault! I ought to have told you—or if Father had—" She was whispering, clinging to him, forgetting for the moment that others were near. "They tricked me, Dale. I *did* think it was a snake!"

It was then Bill took her by the arm and pulled her to her feet.

"Say, cut out the love-makin'! We ain't through with you yet," he said gruffly. "He says you've got three books of his, and the money's in them. Where are they at?"

"Books?" Cynthy brushed the tears from her eyes and stared bewilderedly at Bill. "How can it be in the books? I've been reading them, and there isn't a sign of any money!"

"In the covers, he says. Where are they at? I'm goin' to leave you folks here with Jack, while I ride down and get 'em. What room are they in, Cynthy?"

"They're not in any room," Cynthy said sullenly.

"Say, you better let me go after them books," Jack cut in meaningly, but Bill chose to ignore that remark.

"Whadda yuh mean, not in any room?" He was glaring suspiciously at Cynthy. "Where are they, then? You better not get foxy about it, or next time there won't be any foolin' about the snake. Why ain't they in any room?"

"Stop pinching my arm, Bill Bradley! They just *aren't* in any room, that's why. Oh, I wish Father were here!"

"Why ain't they in any room? Hurry up—the longer you stall around, the longer you and your sweetie here will be tied up. Why ain't they in any room?" Bill's face was bent close to Cynthy's and his eyes were ferociously impelling.

"Because they're not in the house."

"Where are they, then?" Bill fairly barked the question. "In the stable?"

"No!"

"Where, then?"

"Outdoors."

Bill took a deep breath and his whole frame was seen to shiver with the savage intensity of his desire to get at the money.

"Aw, git it out of her!" Jack Smith urged impatiently. "You can, all right, if you go right after her. Make her tell!"

"You shut up," Bill ordered roughly. "I'm runnin' this. "You say them books are outdoors. Whereabouts outdoors?"

"They're not on the ranch at all," said Cynthy, turning her glance beseechingly toward Dale.

"Tell him, Cynthy," he said gently. "Let them get the money and go." He glared at Bill. "You can have the money, you murdering crooks, but don't think it's going to end there. Tell him, Cynthy, and let's get it over with. What did you do with the books?"

"I started to bring them to you," Cynthy said, her voice trembling a little. "I—I wanted to talk to you, and—I used the books for an excuse to ride up and see you. I was going to pretend you'd forgotten them when you moved your things up to Hugh's—"

"Where *are* they?" bellowed Bill. "At Hugh's place? Hurry up! I'm through foolin' with you, I can tell yuh right now!"

"I had to talk to you, Dale," Cynthy went back to the beginning. "There was something I wanted to tell you, and I thought maybe you'd forgotten the books. I can see now," she added, her voice and manner steadying as she perversely continued her explanation, "I can see why you did give them to me to keep for you. It wasn't just to show you trusted me—it was because the money was

in them and you thought it would be safer—"

"Where—are—them *books?*" Bill roared. "Nobody gives a damn what you think an' what he thinks; git to the point, why don't you?"

"I'm coming to the point," said Cynthy. "The money has kept this long, and you've lived without it; you'll live another minute, I'm sure. So," she turned again to Dale, "I thought I'd take the books, and my fishing tackle so mother wouldn't worry—"

"Say," said Bill in a voice of suppressed fury, "if you don't tell me right now where them books is, I'm goin' to hang this feller of yourn till he's so damn' dead the buzzards won't eat 'im!"

"And if you do you may as well hang me too, because I never will tell you a thing if you don't behave yourself and leave us both alone!" Cynthy actually stamped her foot at him.

"Still, I'd tell him if I were you," Dale urged. "I'd give fifty thousand dollars right now to get the cramp out of my arms."

"I—I hate to, Dale! I hate to give him the satisfaction. I see now how you felt about giving in."

"I know, but—"

"Say, choke it out of 'er, why don't you?" Jack demanded, with growing impatience. "You goin' to let her make a monkey of you, Bill?"

"She'll tell," Bill said menacingly, "when she sees her dude sweetheart swingin' from that limb ag'in. She'll tell, fast enough!"

"You wouldn't dare!" cried Cynthy. And then, when she saw Bill pull the noose toward him, "Oh, don't! They're in my saddle pocket!"

"Ah-h!" Bill gave an inarticulate snarl of triumph and let go the rope. "Hey, you come back here!" he shouted after Jack, who was running to the black horse stamping at the flies, while he nibbled daintily at the leaves of the bushes near him. "I'll get them books myself."

"Aw, what's the matter with you?" Jack growled, coming back with a package neatly wrapped in newspaper. "Think I'm goin' to run off with it?"

Bill snatched the package, broke the string with a hasty jerk of his finger beneath it and pulled off the paper. There were the red morocco books just as Cynthy had said, gleaming richly in the wavering flecks of sunlight sifting through the branches of the tree. But their beauty was lost upon those four, who converged to a close circle around them; on the one side Hugh, his face pale and streaked with blood, staring fixedly from where he stood bound; Dale looking on impassively from the other. Cynthy, once the attention was diverted from herself to the package,

retreated to the tree and crouched beside him, watching tearfully.

"Oh, it's a *crime* to ruin those lovely books," she cried protestingly, as Bill got out his jackknife and opened its sharpest blade.

"It's a crime they'll pay for," Dale said grimly. "Anyway, Stan and I were right—they never would have found out in a thousand years. They had to be told—"

"Cut around the edges!" Jack Smith warned nervously. "You want to haggle 'em to pieces? How many bills is there?" he asked Dale curiously, but Dale refused to answer save with a curl of the lip. Bill paid no attention. He was carefully slicing the leather binding at the back, and now he began peeling it off its padding, which seemed to be nothing but pasteboard like the others.

"You'd do better if you worked from the inside of the cover," Dale told him, and without a word or a look Bill opened the book and set to work again.

"What the hell!" he snorted suddenly, pulling up the corner of a banknote. "That's only a dollar bill!" He looked suspiciously at Dale.

"A dollar? I don't see how it got there—must be one of Stan's jokes. You'll find ten bills in the three books, Bill—fifty thousand dollars in all—

and I wish you much joy of it!" he added viciously.

"Oh, it's a *shame* for them to get all that money!" mourned Cynthy.

But no one heeded her, not even Dale; for Bill was pulling other banknotes from the book, and as he looked at the denomination of each one, he swore and threw it crumpled in the grass, where the masked bandits clawed for it hastily.

Without a word Bill pitched the mutilated book far into the bushes and snatched another from Jack's nerveless hands. Swiftly he riddled that one, scanning each green slip of currency hurriedly. The third and last yielding something more —a half sheet of paper neatly typed and signed.

"What's that?" Dale cried sharply, as Bill unfolded it. "Isn't the money there? What's the paper? I never put in any paper, nor Stan either. What's the matter?"

Bill choked upon the words he felt crowding for utterance. He struck Jack Smith brutally out of his path and strode up, shaking his fist and the paper at Dale, sitting helpless there at the foot of the tree.

"Sold!" he ejaculated in a strangled tone, when he stood towering over his prisoner. "Read that! If I thought you knew it was there, I'd blow your damn' brains out!"

"What is it?" Dale kept repeating dazedly. "How can I read it if you won't hold it still? Get it and read it, Cynthy."

So Cynthy took the paper from Bill and read it hastily through in silence; gave a hysterical laugh, checked herself and smoothed the paper like a schoolgirl preparing to read her own composition before the class. But she made the mistake of looking up first into Bill's purpling countenance and giggled again.

"Oh, it's the funniest—well, here, I'll read it, Dale:

"Chicago, June 2nd.
"This is to certify that I hereby refuse to aid, abet or encourage a fool. Dale, you big sap, you surely overlooked the fact that books are printed to be borrowed, lost or stolen. I have therefore taken the liberty of removing your five-thousand-dollar bills and substituting one-dollar bills. The fifty thousand I have placed in my bank. In case this paper is found by a thief, I will add that I shall surrender the money only upon proper identification made through regular banking channels. If Dale finds it, I hope he will realize I am acting in his best interests.

"John Stanley.

"So you see," said Cynthy, as she folded the paper again and pushed it into Dale's pocket, "there isn't any fifty thousand dollars, and you've

had your trouble for your pains. What you'd better do, Bill Bradley, is turn these boys loose and beat it."

"And you'll just come along, you're so damn' smart," glowered Bill, and had her once more in his grasp before she could get to her feet. "You've had a damn' sight too much to say around here, anyway."

"Come along where?" gasped Cynthy.

"Don't be a fool," cried Dale. "You fellows are in bad enough, right now. Keep your hands off her."

"Aw, to hell with you!" Bill retorted. "Get their horses and come on, boys." For the second time he led Cynthy off down the trail, Jack and the two masked and nameless ones running to untie the three horses of their victims.

"Hey! You leave my horses alone!" Hugh frantically commanded, straining at the ropes. "You can't pull a stunt like that—"

"Think we're goin' off without a little something to show for our trouble?" Bill sneered over his shoulder. "Come on, boys, bring 'em along. The walkin's good," he called maliciously, as he disappeared in the bushes.

"Are they going to take their spite out on Cynthy?" Dale groaned, anguish once more seizing his very soul.

"Oh, Cynthy's all right—they'll take her down the trail a ways and turn her loose. Damn 'em, they've stole two of the best saddle horses I've got! If they think they can get away with that, they're crazy! I'll—" Hugh drifted off into maledictions.

Into the midst of this walked Cynthy, white and weary, tears sliding slowly down her cheeks. She went straight to Dale and began working on the knotted rope, and as she pulled and tugged, she cried drearily.

"Cynthy—sweetheart!" Dale softly protested, keeping his voice low lest Hugh should overhear the unaccustomed endearment. "What did they do? Are you—hurt?"

"They took—Hawk!" wailed Cynthy. "It's my fault—I had no business riding him when Father's gone. They've stolen him and Bill's riding him away—and Dale, Bill Bradley is mean to his horses! That's one reason why Father fired him." She glanced toward Hugh and bent her head to whisper in Dale's ear. "There's something else I found out, but I can't tell you now. I don't want Hugh to know—"

"Say, are you going to spend the day there?" Hugh demanded roughly. "We've got to get back to the ranch and start the boys out after that gang! You can talk on the trail, you two."

"Hugh," asked Cynthy, while she was untying him—Dale not yet having the full use of his numbed hands—"did you recognize either of those two fellows who kept their masks on?"

"Me? No. I don't give a damn who they are; I'm going to get them for this and get them good. Strangers—outlaws from up Hungry Hollow way, most likely. That's where Bill Bradley has been hanging out, I hear."

"Didn't it strike you as queer that perfect strangers would be so careful not to give us anything to identify them by? Bill and Jack didn't seem to care."

"Say, the mental processes of a bunch of horse thieves don't interest me a darn bit," Hugh grumbled. "It's what they do that counts. I'll get those horses of mine back, if I have to follow them to the Canadian line!"

"So will Father," Cynthy sighed. "To think that with all the horses on the ranch, I had to take Hawk on this particular day! It will just about floor Father when he hears of it."

They drank deeply from the spring and then made their way out of the little grove and up the faint trail that went winding around the foot of the bold hill, beyond which lay the Mowerby ranch. As they topped a slope where a grassy ridge slanted down from the crest of the hill,

Hugh stopped and stared gloomily up that way.

"She's a tough old hill to take on an empty stomach," he grinned sourly, "but the sooner we tackle it, the sooner we'll get home." And he started to climb, Dale and Cynthy following hand in hand a few paces behind him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"LITTLE CYNTHY SHOULD COUNT TEN!"

It was not so far up the hill, though it was farther than Hugh had estimated, and it was very steep. More than once it occurred to Dale that Bill Bradley and his gang must have been in an excessively cautious mood, if they left their horses away over on this side of the hill and walked across. Judging from Bill's boldness and his general disposition to go right after the thing he wanted, Dale did not really believe in this hike over the hill. They must have ridden to the ranch and left their horses down somewhere along the creek. Now that he was a bit more familiar with the topography of the country, he could understand how easily Hugh might have failed to come across their tracks.

And yet, they must have had some business over on this side of the hill, or they would not have been hidden in the grove down there, all ready to pounce. That was a strange coincidence, to say the least. Was it possible that Bill or Jack

had been listening outside the den window last night when he and Hugh had planned to search this side of the hill? He remembered an open window near the fireplace, and that Hugh had opened it because Lee Chow had built too generous a fire in the den that evening, and the room had got too warm for comfort. It was quite possible that Bill had been anxious to know what they thought of the robbery and what they meant to do, and since he had once worked for Quin Burnett he certainly would have visited the Mowerby ranch often enough to be perfectly familiar with the house and Hugh's habits.

That thought led him to the mystery of the wallet in the wood box at Burnett's. Bill must have done that. Dale looked at Cynthy, half intending to ask her what she thought of the theory. But Cynthy was absorbed in her own worries and seemed unwilling to talk, so he gave up the idea of discussion and set himself to the task of making the climb as easy for her as possible. Talking it over with Hugh was out of the question; Hugh was forging determinedly up the hill, his mind plainly filled with the one purpose of reaching home as soon as possible, so that he could get on the trail of Bill Bradley and his gang.

Hugh reached the summit of the hill five minutes ahead of Dale and Cynthy, and with a hur-

ried glance behind him and a cursory wave of the hand, he disappeared over the crest.

"Hugh's mad," said Cynthy dully, when they stood finally upon the top. "Bill was an awful fool to take our horses, Dale. Of course, he was terribly upset over not getting what he was after, but he must have known he'd simply be putting Hugh and Father on his trail. He knows Hugh is a poor loser—or he ought to know it. And Father's the sweetest thing on earth until you get him thoroughly roused, and then there's nothing will stop him."

"Still, if they went off up in that country over there, I should think they might feel fairly safe. Lord knows it's rough enough. Just look at all those canyons and peaks and pinnacles and things. Hugh said they might be up around Haystack Butte—is that it, away off there?"

"That big one standing by itself, yes. That's about where Grey Bull runs into Dugout—up this side of Haystack. And you see that rough country over there to the left, the one where the red cliffs are? Hungry Hollow country is off in there. Yellow Peak is this side—you can't miss that; it names itself in your mind. And away on up beyond is Hole-in-the-Wall; there's no end to hide-out country; if they want to stay in Wyoming they can, for months and months. Yes, they can

feel reasonably safe, or they could, if Father doesn't get after them. He knows the country as well as they do, and he has an uncanny way of guessing what the other fellow will do. That's what made him such a splendid sheriff."

Dale's mind wandered from the subject, vital though it was. He had glanced at Cynthy's face with her dark hair loosened about it and the somber look in her eyes, and all at once nothing else seemed to matter in the least. His arms slid around her so suddenly that Cynthy gave a little gasp of surprise.

"You know, Cynthy, I'm terribly in love with you," he said, his head bowed so that his cheek rested against hers and felt the warmth rising there. "I have been all along. But when you screamed down there, I thought I'd go crazy. It was a thousand times worse than the hanging stunt they pulled on me, and that was bad enough."

"That was when I wanted to die," Cynthy whispered, breathing quickly at the memory. "Don't let's talk about it, Dale."

"What I want to say is, will you marry me, Cynthy? After awhile, when I find the place where we could live always and just ride around and fish and train polo ponies—would you like that, dear?"

"Polo, fishing, riding or getting married?" asked Cynthy, laughing tremulously as she loosened his clasp and drew away from him.

"Getting married. The rest wouldn't matter so much. I could be happy anywhere, doing anything you liked. Will you marry me, Cynthy?"

"I—well, maybe—perhaps," stammered Cynthy, struggling to regain her usual crisp, cool manner. "We've had so much mystery and excitement, and we've argued so much, I really don't know exactly how I do feel about you."

"But I thought you said you wanted to die—"

"But that may have been my naturally tender heart," Cynthy hurriedly recanted. "I might have felt the same way over Hugh. If they had tried it on him, I'd have a better chance to study my reactions. I know I was perfectly insane with the horror—" she caught herself back from too vivid a memory of it "—but even if it had been Hugh—"

"You didn't run and grab Hugh and cry on his shoulder when you thought they'd dragged a snake across your neck," Dale reminded her pitilessly. "What about that reaction?"

Cynthy stood with her hands clasped in front of her and meditated upon that idea.

"That does sort of look as if I—still, I don't know, Dale. You see, I've known Hugh Mowerby

since we were both kids, and he used to be the meanest little tike! He was always chasing us girls with dead snakes; me more than Donna, because I'd yell louder. No, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't expect much sympathy from Hugh. So—"

"You know perfectly darned well you love me and you're going to marry me," Dale abruptly terminated the discussion in the way best known to lovers. "Now the money question's settled, I don't think we'll have much to argue about; do you?"

"Well, I've never yet been at any great disadvantage for want of a subject," Cynthy demurely pointed out, "so I can't say I don't think we'd ever argue again. It seems to me we're bound to."

"But you're going to marry me, aren't you?"

"That," said Cynthy more seriously, "I can't decide all in a minute, Dale. I'm not that modern. I'd have to know you better; I'd want to know what Father thought about it. Just now he hasn't the highest opinion in the world of you, I'm sorry to say. He thinks you're pretty nearly subnormal mentally, or you wouldn't have brought all that money out here with you. Of course you didn't, really, but you thought you had and the effect was just the same. Whether Father will let his sense of humor prevail when he hears the whole

story, remains to be seen. Wait till this trouble settles down and Father has a chance to get really acquainted with you. Then, if he revises his opinion of you—"

"I beg your pardon," Dale interrupted her. "I haven't asked your Father to marry me, Cynthy. What he thinks about me can't make the slightest bit of difference to me."

"Maybe not, but it makes a difference to his daughter Hyacinth, let me tell you. Father knows men and he can read character, and I've always said that I'd trust Father's judgment when it came to choosing my husband—"

"And I suppose such a trivial thing as love would not be considered at all in the transaction," Dale interrupted her, his ardor cooling a bit.

"Oh," said Cynthy lightly, as she started down the hill, "it might carry some weight in the argument. But Father's opinion of the young man would probably tip the balance of judgment one way or the other. A girl's got no sense when she comes to loving."

"And if she's in love, she doesn't care a whoop for anybody's opinion but her own!"

"Oh, yes, she does," Cynthy contradicted, looking back at him with wide, solemn eyes. "Take you, for instance. I believe I'm in love with you, but there's no sense in it, really. I love the way

your voice sounds when you're just ready to laugh, and I love that—that—well, something or other in your singing; I don't know what it is, but it just *gets* me! I love your darned stubbornness, and I think you are really very good looking, Dale, and your manners are perfect. And above all (I really shouldn't tell you this, but I'm being honest with you), that trick you have of opening your eyes and then shutting them right down to a little narrow crack between your eyelids when you laugh—sometimes my heart just *flops* when you do that. But even so—"

"Cynthy! You little devil, dear—"

"Yes, that tone too—it all helps to steal a poor girl's brains away from her," Cynthy went on with a calm ruthlessness that might have been at least one third sincere.

"But as for marrying that combination of attractions, not knowing what's back of them all —why, little Cynthy should wait and count ten, believe me! All I really know about you," she declared, with a gurgle of laughter in her voice, "is that you thought you had fifty thousand dollars hidden where no one could find it, and you let yourself and your friends be bullied and browbeaten a lot before you'd tell where you thought it was—and everybody got beautifully stung."

"And is that all?"

"Well, of course the fact that you seem willing to marry a poor little sage chicken that's never been to college or even bobbed her hair—that's an indication of a certain quality of discriminating judgment; but even so—"

"Well?"

"Even so, I still think little Cynthy should count ten."

"Well, hurry up and count it, then. One, two, three,—go on and count!" Dale, beating the numbers upon the air, caught her hand and held it forcibly.

"Count ten," Cynthy finished, "and then ask her good, kind and wise Father whether her love is a wise, matrimonial kind of love or just—"

"Yes?"

"Just plain crazy." Cynthy laughed, tilting back her head to look into Dale's face, and felt her laughter stopped with his lips.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HUGH RIDES ALONE

It did not seem possible that they had loitered more than a few minutes up there on the wind-swept hilltop, and Dale would have told you that they came down as quickly as it was safe to descend those treacherous slopes of loose rubble and shale. There was one exciting interval, it is true, when a snake wriggled out and away from the spot where Cynthy was just going to put her foot, and she refused to take another step until Dale had hunted the reptile down and dispatched it with two or three well-aimed rocks. Then there was one other short stop, while they sat resting on a flat ledge which jutted out invitingly from the hill, and Cynthy pointed out the patch of vivid green which she declared was the aspen grove behind her house. They spent five minutes —certainly no more, they would have assured you —discussing and comparing their thoughts and emotions during that tense hour when Bill Bradley had them in his power, and they laughed a little over the look on Bill's face when he had

finally convinced himself that there was no fortune within his grasp. And that reminded Dale to ask Cynthy what it was she wanted to tell him when Hugh could not overhear. But Cynthy had changed her mind about telling. She wanted to talk to her father about it first, she said, and the argument which followed that statement left so decided a coolness between them that Cynthy walked alone the rest of the way, scrambling over the rocks with a willful disregard of sprained ankles and purposely keeping as far away from Dale as the route they must follow would permit, though that way was rougher and the broken shale ground bits of leather off the soles of her laced boots, while a nail, loosened in the leather, thrust up through her stocking and nagged at her tired foot.

Cynthy's spirits drooped. Back up there on the summit life had been glorious, Dale's eager lips pressed against her own. Even down in the grove by the water cress pool, in the very midst of her anguished terror life had held the thrill of danger. Her thoughts flew once to the slow, toilsome climb to the top, hand in hand with Dale and knowing what words waited just behind his lips, wanting to be spoken.

And then she remembered with a pang how Bill Bradley had stolen Hawk, and tears stung

her eyelids and slid slowly down her cheeks. She would have to tell Father, and she was afraid to hurt him with the confession of her disobedience. For although Quin had never forbidden her in so many words, she knew that she was not supposed to ride Hawk. And there was that other thing she must tell Father—but she was afraid to tell that too. It seemed to Cynthy that even with the money mystery disposed of, their troubles had only begun. And not the smallest part of that impending trouble was this new, mysterious, slightly terrifying emotion called love, which had suddenly swept that lean, handsome man and herself together. Cynthy's face brooded as she picked her way wearily down to the world that would always seem a little different after this day.

They were nearing the base of the hill now and the corrals and stables were immediately below them. Dale's thoughts were not the thoughts of Cynthy, though sometimes they ran close alongside, like two streams seeking the same valley to pour themselves into the river beyond. Bill Bradley and Jack, brazen in their outlawry, going after their plunder as ruthlessly as any gangster in the city of his birth—and not getting it, just because Stan had played one of his unexpected, ironical little jokes.

He might have known Stan would be up to

something if he were left alone with those books in the presses. Had Stan been the one to send word out ahead that Dale had all that money in his possession? Hardly. There was always the wisdom of hard common sense in Stan's jokes, and to divulge that secret would be too probable a bid for murder. No, while it was like Stan to take out the money and leave the letter inside, he certainly would not betray the secret to any one. Dale was sure of that. So the mystery of how Bill knew about the money still remained as deep as at first and there seemed no way of solving it, unless Bill were captured and made to tell the whole story.

That brought Dale to Hugh and his rage because his horses were stolen. Hugh had not borne up very well under the ordeal of being tied to a tree, and Dale was vaguely disappointed in that immediate and obvious weakening. To be sure, it was not Hugh's affair at first—not until they led his horses away—but still one would expect him to show a little more grit. Almost from the start he had begged Dale to yield. Sensible, maybe—but not just the stand one would expect Hugh to take. Why, Cynthy had shown more backbone than that. Clear nerve, she was—the little devil!

Dale turned and looked back at her, grinning tentatively, hoping that she had gotten over her

fit of temper. But when she saw him waiting she deliberately turned aside to come down on the farther side of an outcropping of rock, and she did not answer Dale when he called to her. The feud was still on, it seemed, though for the life of him Dale could not remember what it was he had said that had angered her so; something about her father dominating her every thought; or if he had not said it, that at least was what he had thought and would go on thinking, until Cynthy promised to marry him. When he faced the fact squarely it rather astonished Dale to realize how tremendously vital it was that Cynthy should promise that, and the most astonishing thing about it was the suddenness of his overwhelming desire for her. Or perhaps it had been growing in his heart ever since their first meeting and had only flowered in the heat of their danger together.

That thought swept every other from his mind and he turned and went striding toward her, his dust-streaked face stern but his eyes alight and smiling.

"Look here, Cynthy, I take it back, whatever it was I said. I can't stand having you angry, and whatever your father says is all right with me—unless he tells you I'm not the man for you. If he does, don't you believe it. It'll only prove

he doesn't know how to pick husbands for his girls, that's all. You're what brought me to Wyoming, and all the fathers in the country couldn't keep us apart."

"First it was cattle, then it was polo ponies, and now it's—"

"You. You first and maybe the rest afterwards, if it's what you want. Sweetheart, I *wish* you'd say—"

"Oh, there's Hugh, just getting on his horse!" she interrupted him. "He certainly is in a hurry to get on Bill's trail—and why do you suppose he's striking out alone? They'll kill him if he runs across them."

Dale turned and looked down. Riding out from beyond the stable was Hugh, beyond all doubt. It did not seem possible that he would have had time to get ready for the pursuit. There were certain preparations, surely, that he would have to make. For one thing, he had not eaten since breakfast, and no matter how wrought up he might be over the loss, he certainly would not think of going without his dinner.

"He must be just going down into the pasture after horses," Dale answered her. "He'd take the boys along after Bill's gang—some of them, anyway. And I'm going too. Come on, dear, we'll have to hurry or I'll be left out of the hunt."

"You'll be left out anyway, Dale Emery, unless you want to go with Father," Cynthy told him with a certain proprietary air that even in those circumstances thrilled Dale, though it also impressed him as being the precursor of another argument. But there wasn't time for that, with Hugh already in the saddle, and he seized her hand and started to run down a grassy slope, shouting at Hugh.

But Hugh, looking up, only waved his hand and set off up the narrow valley at a sharp gallop. And he went alone, that was certain.

"He's going straight up Dugout," Cynthy said, as the two slowed again on rougher ground. "He must be crazy. Why didn't he wait for the boys? It isn't as if he thought he had some chance of overtaking them, for he hasn't. It's a case where a pack outfit is almost an absolute necessity if he means to keep after them till he gets his horses."

"Well, he's cheated himself out of a darn good sleuth when he rode off without me," Dale stated disapprovingly; and, anxious as she was, Cynthy had to laugh.

"It will be a miracle if he gets his horses alone, but I hope he's that lucky. If he could get Hawk before Father comes home and misses him, I'd forgive every mean thing Hugh ever did to me—but

I don't see how he can. It's impossible, that's all."

"Then why would he attempt it?" Dale helped her through a wire fence and led the way to the nearest corral and so to the path that ran along beside it. "Hugh's no fool. He must know what he's doing, Cynthy."

But Cynthy shook her head dissentingly and stopped to stare up the trail, where a thin banner of dust marked Hugh's swift departure.

"You know, Dale, I've lived here nearly all my life and I know what I'm talking about. I've heard stories of things that happened in that rough country above here as far back as I can remember, and I've been in it too, with the boys; at least, as far up as the edge of Hungry Hollow—I never actually went into that, because it's so rough and wild that none of us cared to tackle it when we didn't have to. And there were outlaws hanging out in there somewhere too, who might take a shot at us. I tell you, Dale, hunting a needle in a haystack is no bigger job than to ride from here and expect to find those fellows who left Grey Bull spring two hours or so ago.

"Why, reason it out for yourself, Dale! I showed you from the top of the hill what the country is like; all canyons and little hidden valleys and ridges and thickets; how is Hugh to know which way they'd go?"

"Unless," ventured Dale, "he counts on tracking them."

"Well, even if he does, they have two hours' start and they can dodge him for weeks if they want to. And it would be just as easy to waylay him. I still say he's crazy to go off up there alone. Meeker and Donald are good horses, of course, but they're not so priceless that Hugh is justified in risking his life for them. He's got plenty more just as good as they are. It isn't like Father's black Hawk." Her lip trembled there. "Hawk's one horse in a thousand and Father's been offered enormous prices for him many a time."

Dale did not say anything to that, except to tell her not to worry. It was Cynthy's burden of trouble and he did not know just how Quin was going to react to the loss of his horse. He'd probably blame Cynthy for it in his heart, but whether he would add to her remorse the bitterness of his reproaches no one could guess.

"Lee Chow must have dinner ready," Cynthy observed dispiritedly, as they approached the house. "We'll eat, and then I'll see if I can rustle something to ride home. Father might possibly be back to-day. They went in day before yesterday, and they weren't going to stay. I don't know how I'm ever going to tell him," she said, and heaved a deep sigh.

"Let me be the one, dear. I'll take the blame; it properly belongs to me, anyway. If I hadn't played the fool with that money it wouldn't have happened, so I'm willing to be the goat. It wasn't your fault they jumped us over there; it was mine. I'll point that out to your dad. He'll see it—he's bound to."

"Well, you can't expect to make yourself popular with Father that way," Cynthy observed, and sighed again as they went up the porch steps together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"I WISH YOU LUCK, CHICAGO!"

DEPRESSION seized the two, and that in spite of the very good dinner which the smiling Lee Chow set before them. Cynthy tried to extract some information from him while they ate, but though Lee Chow spoke very intelligible English, nothing he said was of the slightest importance. He might have been serving Jim Mowerby in town for all he apparently knew of the ranch or the people on it. Dale gathered that Lee's sole duty and interest lay in taking care of the big house and in cooking his master's meals when that young man chanced to be there to eat them. He didn't know where Hugh had gone or when he would come back, he said, and Dale decided that Lee was telling the truth. Hugh had eaten his dinner, at any rate, before he left.

Where the other boys were, when they had left or when they would return were no concern of Lee Chow's. When Dale asked him point-blank how often he went down to the corrals, Lee replied that he went to the chicken house if he needed

eggs before some one brought them to the house; other times he didn't go. He had not been down there for many days, he declared, and Dale believed him.

So, there being neither cowboys on the ranch nor any information to be had from the cook, they rested for a little while on the porch and then went down to see what they could find to ride. Corrals and stables were empty, however, and Cynthy declared that it would be as much work to go down afoot to the pasture to catch a couple of horses as it would be to walk home. There was nothing much they could do but wait until some of the boys rode in—a delay which Dale at least did not find irksome.

Bird Ellis and Dick Tallant were the first to arrive. They were driving a small bunch of cows and calves which they had gleaned from the canyons around Yellow Peak and they fully expected that the other boys would be home ahead of them, they said, as they turned the cattle into a corral and rode over to where Dale and Cynthy waited for them. They seemed surprised when they discovered that Hugh was not at home, but they looked more astonished still when they heard what had happened. But when Dale suggested that they get fresh horses and go after Hugh, they shook their heads.

"We wouldn't get no thanks for buttin' in where we ain't asked," Bird objected. "Hugh knows his own business, and if he wants to tackle Bill Bradley alone, that's his lookout. Did he leave word we was to come along up there soon as we got back?"

"Well, no," Dale admitted, "he didn't. But how about all the men in the country turning out and hunting down a horse thief? I thought that was the regular custom, out here. I thought you boys would buckle on your six-shooters and form a posse the minute you heard the news. Don't you fellows live up to *any* of your Western traditions?"

Bird grinned and cast a sidelong look at Dick, and Dick gave a short laugh.

"Sure. The best tradition we've got is mindin' our own business and lettin' the other feller do the same," he answered. "Hugh'd fire us in a holy minute, if we went trailin' him up, tryin' to make out he was liable to need help."

"Darn right," Bird supported that statement. "Hugh's awful easy-goin' and all that, but you bet we don't butt in on his affairs. If he thinks he can get them two saddle horses back without help, I sure ain't going to argue with him. Bill Bradley, you say? Well, he wouldn't have the nerve to keep 'em, even if he did take 'em. He'll turn 'em back, all right."

"But he stole Hawk too," Cynthy told him again. "You seem to think Bill was just kidding, but he wasn't. He tied us all to trees, and he struck Hugh in the face with his fist. Hugh's cheek is all swollen and his eye is black—and just as sure as he gets within shooting distance of Bill Bradley, there's going to be trouble, you mark my words."

The two cowboys glanced at each other undecidedly but Bird afterward shook his head.

"One thing Hugh's beat into our skulls is that we're to mind our own business," he repeated, in a tone of real misgiving. "On the square, Chicago, I don't know what to do about it. It sure does look as if Hugh was rammin' his head into a hornets' nest, but gosh darn it, he must know what he's doin'—"

"Hugh," said Cynthy positively, "was too sore to know anything. Maybe you don't know what a temper he's got, but I do. He's easy-going, yes; but once he does start, there's nothing will stop him. Bill hit him in the face, remember, and then stole two of his horses. Hugh told us he'd follow Bill Bradley to the Canada line but what he'd get them back, and he's just mad enough to do it too."

"Well, that's all right," argued Bird, "but that's all the more reason why he won't thank

anybody for buttin' in on his fight. I guess I know Hugh a little better'n you do, Cynthy."

"And you'd let him go up there alone and get killed?"

"Aw, Hugh can take care of himself," Dick protested uneasily. "It's the other fellow you oughta be worryin' about."

"But there were four of them," Dale put in. "That fellow they call Jack Smith is a tougher guy than Bill, in my opinion. Bill took the lead, but it was Jack that egged him on most of the time."

"Yeah, Jack's a bag egg, all right—hard-boiled as they make 'em. Who was the other two?" Bird asked curiously. "Anybody Hugh knows?"

"I don't think so. Pretty hard to recognize if he did know them. They were both medium height and build, and they had their faces completely covered with black neckerchiefs and holes cut for their eyes, and their hats pulled away down low. They never spoke once, and seemed to keep in the background and do as they were told. Jack and Bill pulled off their masks and made themselves comfortable. They didn't care, apparently, who knew them for bandits."

"Had a few drinks, maybe. They're pretty braggy, all right, when they're about half lit up. Well," Bird concluded in a somewhat dubious

tone, "I don't hardly know what to do. Hugh's so damn' touchy."

"It ain't like anybody else with a horse-stealin' case to handle," Dick added his explanation. "Anybody else, we'd buckle on the hardware and get right out after 'em. But Bill and Hugh—well I dunno. They used to be pretty good friends, before Bill went to the wild bunch and got to stickin' up folks and stealin' cattle an' so on. Don't seem to me like Bill'd run off any of Hugh's stuff—"

"Oh, come on, Dale!" Cynthy cried impatiently. "We'll go home and see if Father's got back yet. I'll bet *he* won't stutter around over whether he'd better get after Hugh or not. Got anything we can ride, Dick?"

Dick stalked over to a certain shed and looked in, coming back with a shake of his head. "Hugh's got the only extra saddle we had," he announced. "I'll go ketch up the buggy team and you can drive home, Cynthy. That be all right? They're gentle."

"Oh, all right," Cynthy assented, turning away from them. "They've got that new saddle of mine too," she suddenly remembered, looking ready to cry. "Father had it made to order for me last Christmas. And my fishing tackle and rod—oh, I can't blame Hugh much for going off alone

after them. I would too, if I had a horse I could ride. I feel just that way!"

"Well, they have everything of mine that I own in Wyoming, when you come to counting losses," said Dale. "I must say they're thorough. Bill never seems to overlook anything, once he turns his eyes your way."

"I sure wish we knew what Hugh wants us to do about it," Bird anxiously observed. "Kind of a queer situation, as I see it. Hugh and Bill knowin' each other like they do, that makes it a kinda personal matter, don't yuh see—"

"Oh, forget it, then!" snapped Cynthy. "I know Bill too. I've known him for years and years. But that doesn't matter a darned bit these days. He's a thief and an outlaw just the same, isn't he? You fellows make me tired!" Cynthy went off and sat down on a wagon tongue to wait and refused to discuss the matter any further. A mood which seemed to relieve Bird Ellis of considerable embarrassment.

"Darn the luck, Chicago, me and Dick must look like we're yellow all the way through," he confided to Dale, while he unsaddled his sweaty horse and turned him into the corral. "It must seem funny to you that we don't fog right along up country after Hugh—"

"No, I think I can get your viewpoint now.

It's Hugh you aren't sure of. I can see how you feel."

"Hugh's queer in some ways," Bird went on, sending a half-resentful glance toward Cynthy, who had turned her back upon them that they might not see her tears. "You just can't go against Hugh's wishes or orders—not if you want to stay on the pay roll. He's easy in some ways, all right, but you can't cross him. I found that out long ago. And Bill Bradley's always left Hugh's stuff alone. I can't somehow think he'd—how'd it happen, Chicago? The whole thing sounds cuckoo to me. I can't make it out, somehow."

They sat down on a pile of corral rails in the shade of the stable and Dale told the whole story. There seemed to be no reason now for keeping anything secret, and as he talked he remembered that Hugh had said he would get the boys out on the trail of the horses.

"But he didn't say a word to Lee Chow, and he didn't wait to see you boys, so he must have changed his mind. We weren't far behind him coming down the hill, but he was riding away just as we were coming down to the fence over there."

"Hugh's quick," Bird testified. "When he makes up his mind to a thing he's got to do it right now, regardless. Makes it kinda bad some-

times, him droppin' everything on the ranch to go foolin' around about something else. You seen how he was about that polo stuff—and it was a poor time to stop and play around too. We're short-handed and tryin' to get the calves all branded, and Hugh'd be money in pocket if he'd get out and help a little once in awhile, instead of runnin' off on a polo craze right now. Course, it's his ranch, and it ain't my business to run it, but I'm just tellin' you how Hugh is. He's gone off now on some new idea of his own, and it's a ten-to-one shot he don't want nobody buttin' in.

"Thinks he knows just where to head 'em off, maybe, and beat it up there to try out his theory. That'd be Hugh, all over. All I can see to do is set tight till he comes back and gives his orders. Officially, as yuh might say, we don't know nothin' yet."

"Well, I don't suppose you could do much, either. You'd have to know where Hugh went and where Bill went. Here comes Dick—I'm anxious to get Cynthy home. She's had a hard day, and losing that horse of her father's has broken her all up. She really isn't herself at all, I can see that. Try and slip the word to Dick not to discuss the affair with her any more, will you?"

"Sure," said Bird, getting up to open the corral

and let in the driving team trotting up from the pasture gate. "I wish yuh luck, Chicago!"

And Dale, staring after him, wondered who had given Bird a hint of anything special between Cynthy and himself.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

QUIN GETS INTO ACTION

QUIN BURNETT, slumped wearily forward in the jouncing seat of his weather-beaten spring wagon and letting the horses take their own gait on the last half mile of their journey, suddenly realized that some one was coming and swung the team expertly out of the road to make room for passing. But the sleek Mowerby sorrels did not pass; instead they were pulled to a stop and Cynthy leaned out and called to him. That the young fellow from Chicago was driving struck Quin with a swift dismay; it looked so like an elopement surprised in its beginning.

"We heard you coming, Father, just as we were going to turn in to our gate, so we came on to meet you—where are Donna and Rose?"

"Rose made up her mind she wasn't comin' out, and Donna stayed in with her a few days. What's the matter? Where you goin', you two?"

It was his first recognition of Dale's presence, and his tone was a challenge. Cynthy met it with swift speech.

"Nowhere, Father. We were coming home and

we heard the team and drove on to meet you. You know how Mother is when anything goes wrong —and Father, we've had an awful time to-day! First it was Bill Bradley and Jack Smith—they tied us up and hanged Dale twice, to find out where the money was, and he wouldn't tell till they scared me about a snake and made me scream and he thought they were killing me, so he told, and the money wasn't in books at all—or at least only ten dollars and a letter—and Bill was so mad he stole all our horses, and we had to walk back to Hugh's.

"And he blacked Hugh's eye because Hugh tried to make him leave us alone; and Father, Bill's got our horses and saddles! Hugh's gone after him alone, and he'll be killed if they get a chance at him, so we came on to get you. They've got all of Dale's things, his clothes and everything—"

"That," said Quin dryly, "sounds like a case where the State militia'll have to be called out to round up Emery's socks and collars. As for the horses, you say Hugh's after them. They didn't get any horse of ours, did they?"

Cynthy gulped and reached one hand behind her for support, felt it prisoned in Dale's firm grasp and took courage.

"Ha—I was riding H-Hawk, Father."

"Hawk! You mean to tell me Bill Bradley's got *Hawk?*"

Cynthy nodded, her voice having somehow failed her just then.

"She's worried herself sick over it, Mr. Burnett," Dale strove to soften the blow for Cynthy. "She only rode the horse because he needed exercise, and naturally no one could anticipate such a thing as Bill Bradley and his gang—"

"What gang? I thought you said Bill and Jack were alone in this. Seems to me you and Hugh could have managed—"

"Father, you don't understand! Dale couldn't —we were getting a drink over at Grey Bull Spring, and they held us up before we knew there was a soul around. And it wasn't just Bill and Jack, there were two more. And Hugh wasn't there; not till they had us tied solid with our backs against trees so we couldn't move, and then they went and got Hugh and tied him up. *How* could the boys do anything when they were tied?"

"What took you folks over on Grey Bull? And what was you doin' up there at Hugh's, anyway, Cynthy?"

"Cynthy came up to return my books that I had lent her, and as I said, she rode Hawk, thinking to give him a little exercise while you were gone—"

"Yeah, you said that once. Hawk must've needed the exercise pretty bad, runnin' in the pasture as he was. What I want now ain't excuses, young man; it's facts."

Bit by bit he got them, and as the story unfolded, his face grew stony hard. Dale felt that his deepest thoughts were being examined under a miscroscope, whenever Quin's sharp glance was turned upon him, and mentally he squirmed a good deal during the ordeal. But he told it all, lightening the blame all he could for Cynthy.

"And you don't know the other two, you say?" Quin's eyes rested upon her searchingly.

"I—Father, I didn't say anything to Hugh or Dale, but just as they were riding off—they had led me down the trail so I wouldn't be able to untie the boys too soon—I recognized one of them. You may not believe me, Father, but it was Neal. I'm sure of it. I knew him by the way he sat in the saddle. He wore different clothes and his chaps were strange to me and his spurs, but I know it was Neal. When he rode away down the trail, I was sure of it."

"Is Neal gone?"

"He must be, don't you see? I left very early, before Judy had breakfast ready, but Neal was up and doing the chores. Still, he could have beaten

us to Grey Bull if he wanted to; it must have been ten o'clock or after when we got there."

"What horse was he riding over there on Grey Bull?"

"A strange horse, Father. I didn't see the brand, but I knew it wasn't any horse I'd ever seen before."

"It ain't likely it was Neal. Seems to me you'd of recognized him when all the dirty work was goin' on. Dale ought to—"

"I didn't, though. This is the first intimation I've had that Neal was in on it. Whoa, boys!" Dale spoke to the impatient sorrels, quieting them deftly. "Those other two fellows were pretty well disguised, Mr. Burnett."

"Cynthy should 've known Neal anyway."

"But Father, with different clothes and hat and his face completely covered, how could I, when he didn't speak a word? But the minute he got on his horse I knew him. You know how it is yourself, Father."

"It's hard to think Neal's such a Judas as that," Quin said somberly.

"Still, it would account for that wallet being in the wood box, wouldn't it?" Dale ventured reluctantly. "And the prowler in my room when I'd gone up the creek."

"He couldn't be in your room and up at the

falls at the same time, though," Quin reminded him.

"But he could have heard me plan to go fishing, and let Bill and Jack know, so they followed me; and he could have seen them afterwards and got the wallet from them," Dale reasoned swiftly. "I don't like the idea either, Mr. Burnett, but it's the only clue that seems to tie up all the loose ends.

"Don't you see? Bill and Jack were at Dalton's when my baggage was searched there, and Jack was up at the house long enough to do it, while Bill talked with me at the gate. I made no secret of who I was, and they—why, say! They knew about my being robbed in town, for they asked me if I wasn't that Chicago guy, and so on. They kidded me about it, now that I think of it, and they asked me if Neal Somers was up at the house."

"They did?" All the droop was out of Quin's shoulders now. He was leaning toward Dale, his thin face somehow changed and glowing with interest, though it had lost none of its hard keenness around the eyes. "Why didn't you tell me all this before?"

"Well, I didn't connect it with the robbery. They sounded all right and plausible enough, with the account they gave of themselves, and Neal wasn't the only one they asked about. If I

remember correctly they also asked about you, Mr. Burnett. I had no reason then to suspect them of having anything to do with the trouble in town." He could not tell Quin to his face that he had half suspected him of having some hand in the affair.

The old man sat pondering the matter for a minute or two. Afterwards he sighed and straightened his shoulders, as though he had reached some decision in his mind.

"Neal wasn't in town, but Bill Bradley might've been, and Jack too, for all I know," he said. "I've had other theories about that—" his glance went quickly to Cynthy and away again "—but up to a certain point this does look more logical.

"You're right about what happened at the ranch. Neal could've heard you talkin' there with the girls that night, for he was standin' outside the house smokin', when I went in after the boys left. He could've passed the word along to Bill, and he could've met 'em off somewhere in the pasture after they took your clothes, and got the wallet from 'em to make it look as if—I know that wallet was planted for my benefit," he said, with some bitterness, "but I never thought about Neal doin' it. I thought it looked more like some trick of yours. I guess I'll have to admit I was wrong there. I was thrown completely off the track.

"I guess," he said sadly, "it was my fault for not lookin' closer to home for the crook. Neal's lived with us a long time; he was with us when Bill worked for me, come to think of it. A couple of years ago I caught Bill doin' some crooked work and sent him up for a year, thinkin' that would maybe bring him to his senses. I never dreamed Neal was throwin' in with Bill after he served his time and got back into the country, though. Neal was always quiet and never seemed to have any wildness in 'im. I guess that fooled me. And bein' a kind of a relative—"

"It will hurt Mother," Cynthy observed sadly. "Neal has always been a pet of hers, in a way."

"Well, your mother'll have to face it, as far as I can see. I wouldn't say anything about it though, till we're sure. You might be mistaken, Cynthy. I hope so."

"So do I, but I know I'm not," Cynthy told him in a harassed tone. "I know how Neal sits on a horse, just as well as I know you in the saddle; and I could tell you a mile off in the dark. It isn't a matter of clothes when a man starts off on horseback, Father. It's something you can scarcely put a name to, but it's there; individuality, I suppose."

"Bill would take Hawk if he got the chance," mused Quin, reverting to his loss. "He'd steal

'im to get even with me, if for nothin' else. What time was it when they left you?"

"Nearly noon," Dale answered, "after eleven, anyway. We reached Hugh's place about one o'clock. It's twenty minutes to five now." He looked at his watch. "Nearly six hours' start, Mr. Burnett."

"Yes—well, that don't matter so much. They'd make for Hungry Hollow first thing, I suppose. I don't see how I can get out after 'em to-night, right on top of that drive out from town. Gettin' old, I guess. I'll be all right after a night's rest and I'll start out at daybreak. If I had Hawk to ride, I'd overhaul 'em easy." He looked at Cynthy with a grim smile.

"Don't say anything to anybody, either of you," he charged them soberly, yet with a queer, half-whimsical gleam in his eyes, "but I'm a peace officer again. I had Burke appoint me deputy sheriff yesterday, and I've got a State commission as deputy U. S. marshal to boot. I kinda expected things might come to a head up here so I'd need the authority to act as I saw fit. But," he added, "I never expected to start house-cleanin' on my own ranch!"

He picked up the slackened reins and the tired horses lifted their heads expectantly, waiting the signal to start.

"Not a word to your mother, Cynthy, about Neal, whether he's home or not. I expect it'll have to come out about Hawk bein' stole, so you can tell about what happened on Grey Bull if she starts askin' questions. But leave Neal's name out of it, both of you." He spoke to the horses and they went down the side road to the ranch, trotting briskly as if there had been no interruption to their journey.

"Your father's a pretty remarkable old fellow, Cynthy," Dale paid tribute, as he swung the sorrel team around in the road and started after Quin. "Keen, what I mean."

"He's good," Cynthy declared, with a tremble in her voice. "To think he never had a word of reproach for me about losing Hawk! That makes me feel like a worm!"

"Fine!" grinned Dale, just to hearten her. "Count me in as the early bird, will you?"

They were smiling over that when they drove into the yard where Quin stood beside the spring wagon, explaining to his wife just why it was he came home alone. As they passed by on their way to the stable, Cynthy gave a gasp and gripped Dale by the arm.

Neal Somers walked unconcernedly out of the bunk house and began to unhitch Quin's team.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"GET BEHIND THEM ROCKS!"

"WHAT'LL you do if it comes to gun play?" Quin demanded with a quizzical glint in his eyes. "This is a little different from a movie, young man. When Bill and his bunch come at you, they'll most likely come a-shootin', and you can't switch the scene back to something peaceful for a change."

"Well," grinned Dale, "if you'll pardon my making a grandstand play, I'll show you. See that white rock in the bank over there? All right—" And he whipped out the very business-like looking gun Quin had lent him and planted four shots respectably close to the mark. "Guns, horses, fishing and hunting—they've always been something of an obsession with me," he explained half apologetically. "I'm out of practice now, of course, and this gun is strange to me; I really ought to have done better than that."

Quin's lips were seen to pucker in at the corners.

"Oh, all right—if you don't get buck fever at the last minute," he drawled. "Course, we might not run into 'em at all." Then, with a quick searching glance at Dale, "Neal say anything to you about it? I seen you two talkin' together."

"Nothing to indicate he had any special knowledge of the affair. He remarked that he heard I'd been robbed again, and I told him yes, they'd managed to get the money this time. He didn't give any sign of knowing more than he should. If Cynthy wasn't so positive, I'd say Neal knows nothing about it, except what was told him."

"Neal's pretty cute," Quin declared. "He'd have to be to cover up his tracks the way he's done."

"Then you're sure he's the one?"

Quin rode along in silence for a few minutes.

"Well," he said finally, "Cynthy's hard to fool. I've trained her to be pretty sure of herself before she goes on record about anything. There ain't much guesswork in anything she says. Still, she could make a mistake same as other folks. I'll know more about it when I get hold of Bill."

Into Dale's mind flashed the memory of how "Little Cynthy should count ten," and he smiled to himself. What if he should tell Quin about that, just as an illustration of how well she remembered her training? It was a whimsical

thought that passed immediately and left him again wholly engrossed with their errand.

Quin had at first declared that he would go alone, leaving Neal in charge of the ranch and not disrupting the smooth routine of the eight men in the hayfield—five of them cowboys who followed more picturesque pursuits during round-up time. These, Quin convinced himself last night, had not left their work and could not possibly have any connection with Bill Bradley. Apparently they had heard nothing of the affair over on Grey Bull, and Quin had not told them. It was literally a case where "By their works he should know them," for two fair-sized stacks had gone up in his absence and that meant the uninterrupted efforts of the full crew. There was no gainsaying the evidence of those two haystacks.

That left only Dale, who had used all his powers of persuasion before Quin would consent to his going. Dale suspected that the old man had yielded chiefly because he was Cynthy's father and wanted to see what kind of stuff this would-be son-in-law was made of. Dale was privately resolved to show him, and it was in a bloodthirsty mood that he started out with Quin at daybreak.

He reloaded the gun and slid it back into its holster, conscious that Quin was watching him out of the tail of his eye.

"What do you think of Hugh going off alone yesterday the way he did?" he asked casually, by way of making conversation. "Pretty chancy, wasn't it?"

Quin grunted and struck off into a trail new to Dale; one that veered sharply to the right of the road to the Mowerby ranch.

"Depends on what he did when he got trail of 'em," he said, when they were forging up a rather steep slope. "Tell better if I knew what his plan was. What was the idea of goin' off over the hill anyway, huntin' bandits?"

Dale told him Hugh's theory, wishing that he were not riding behind where it was impossible to watch Quin's face.

"Well, I'm goin' over there and pick up the trail at the spring," was Quin's only comment. "If Neal went over to Grey Bull to meet Bill for some reason, this is the trail he'd take. And," he added, "I see somebody's been over the trail just lately. Might've been Neal." He leaned in the saddle, watching the ground as he rode forward. "How'd they know you folks was goin' over there yesterday? Who'd you tell?"

"Why, nobody that I know of. But some one could have listened under the den window the night before when we talked about it."

"Uh-huh," Quin grunted assentingly, and fell

into a musing silence which Dale felt no inclination to break.

The way they took was perfectly plain even to Dale's slight knowledge of the country. They crossed a creek he guessed must be the upper end of Dugout, which flowed through Hugh's ranch; then up over a low, grassy spur of the hill that farther along rose so abruptly to the height over which they had toiled on foot; they entered thin, rustling groves on the eastern slope, where the trail meandered in a gentle downward incline to the river. Quin's gaze was bent always to the trail, where shod hoofprints led the way down to the stream glistening under the morning sunlight. He seemed gravely preoccupied, scarcely conscious of Dale's presence. The only break in the easy, shuffling trot of the big bay he bestrode with the consummate grace of a born horseman was when he pulled up to light his pipe, which he afterwards smoked absently while he rode. They came down to the bank of Grey Bull Creek and Dale, looking at his watch, saw that they had been less than an hour in the saddle. Quin was not hurrying, yet the steady pace ate into the distance.

Suddenly they reached another small grove and with a start Dale recognized the watercress pool and the tree where he had been tied, the limb from

which Bill Bradley had let him dangle until his senses reeled. The rock where Cynthy had sat—the sandwiches lay swarming with ants where they had rolled from her lap. The tree where they had tied Hugh—the leaves of a bush close by were browned with Hugh's blood when Bill had struck him that vicious blow.

Anger mounted in Dale's heart while he sat there on his horse and pointed these places out to Quin Burnett. Cynthy was not with him now to distract his mind from the outrage, and with Quin beside him the encounter revealed itself to him as something heinous, utterly brutal.

"No, Mr. Burnett, you needn't be afraid I'll have buck fever when we meet Bill Bradley," he said abruptly, as they turned to ride on, and for the first time Quin met his look with a bleak smile.

Below the spring they followed Cynthy's footprints going and coming for a hundred yards or more, the tracks leaving the spring blotted out now and then by the boot tracks of the men or the prints of the horses' hoofs. They saw where the men had mounted and she had turned back, and from there on they rode with a sterner attention to the trail and the story it mutely recorded of those who had gone that way: horse tracks in the soil, scuffed pebbles where the trail crossed gravel

patches, all the little betraying signs which plainsmen read as they ride. Bill and his companions had disdained to leave the easy trail or to make any attempt to cover up their tracks. Evidently they rode in full expectation of foiling pursuit farther up in the hills.

Old Baldtop, as Hugh had called the hill they had crossed yesterday, stretched its bare length northward for another three or four miles and then sloped steeply down to the junction of Grey Bull and Dugout creeks. Around its base another dim, rocky trail, evidently leading from the Mowerby ranch, twisted its way among the scattered boulders of the flat and joined the one they were following. Quin halted Dale there and rode back alone along the new trail, returning in ten minutes or so to continue along the side of Dugout Creek, now swollen to the dignity of a considerable stream after receiving the waters of Grey Bull within its rocky banks.

"Did you see any sign of Hugh?" Dale inquired, when he saw that Quin had no intention of volunteering any information.

"Looks as if he might have come up this way. Somebody did," Quin answered him absentmindedly, and Dale let it go at that.

Quin led the way now at a more rapid pace, for the way was level across the flat and fairly straight.

Farther on, however, it climbed up over a point around which Dugout Creek fought its way with a great turmoil among the great rocks that had fallen off the steep banks on either side, and descending the precipitous farther side of the ridge, they found themselves in a canyon high-walled and turning sharply this way and that, rocks and heavy brush growth clogging its floor until progress became slow and somewhat precarious. The trail too had disappeared at the foot of the ridge and they must pick their own way as best they could.

"From here on it's mostly guesswork," Quin volunteered, pausing to inspect a rocky gulch that broke the frowning wall on the right. "They could keep on up this canyon for another couple of miles, but there's a dozen places where they could branch off into other territory. If they headed for Hungry Hollow, they probably swung off up here about half a mile. If they didn't—"

He stopped short, looking quickly up the canyon. The horses too were staring that way, heads up and ears tipped forward.

"Get back behind them rocks," Quin commanded in a low tone, motioning to a splintered ledge that jutted out sharply from the canyon wall. "Somebody's comin'—the whole bunch, by the sound." He hesitated, eyeing Dale with that pierc-

ing gaze which Dale had found so embarrassing last night.

"If it's Bill and his gang, we'll stop 'em right there, where they'll have to come through between them two boulders. Get back where you've got a clear sight of that gap, but don't make a move till I give the word. If it's them and I halt 'em there, I'll expect you to cover 'em with your gun. But don't shoot unless I give the word."

He waved his hand imperiously toward the ledge and Dale wheeled his horse and took up his station there, gun out and ready to shoot. It was in his mind to ask whether the horse was gun shy, but Quin had already backed into the bushes opposite him and just short of the gap, and to call across to him now would be a folly inexcusable, even in a greenhorn. And on second thoughts he decided that Quin would scarcely have given him a horse to ride unless he was pretty certain it would stand for some shooting off its back.

From where he waited he could just see Quin's head and shoulders in profile, silhouetted against a tree stub blackened with fire—probably the victim of a bolt of lightning some time in the past. Quin's face had taken on the cold, impassive look of an Indian as he stared fixedly at the place where the horsemen must appear.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

DALE GOES FISHING

THERE was no mistaking the faint creak of saddle leather, the rattle of bridle chains, the click of iron-shod hoofs upon the rock. From the sounds, several horses were coming at a trot, and Dale wondered why they were hurrying in this direction, when safety lay up among the wild fastnesses of the farther hills. Then for a moment the hoofbeats were silent.

Dale was just wondering what had happened to stop them when without warning Hawk appeared, his brilliant gaze darting this way and that, his nostrils flared to sniff suspiciously the tainted breeze before he threw up his head and sent a loud, inquiring whinny surging up to the beetling canyon walls that gave back the echo eerily again and again. He trotted forward, Meeker and Donald at his heels; and behind them, gun out and ready to fire, came Hugh.

"Hello!" Quin's call was both greeting and warning not to shoot.

"Hello!" Hugh pulled up, plainly prepared to

wheel and dodge back behind the barrier. "That you, Quin?" He was peering toward the sound of Quin's voice.

"Anybody with yuh, Hugh?"

"Not a soul. Why?" Hugh had recovered from his first surprise and was letting his horse advance under a tight rein, with little mincing steps.

Quin rode out from behind the clump of brush, his gun still in his hand, apparently forgotten for the moment.

"Thought you might have some prisoners," he said dryly. "I see you got the horses, all right. Have any trouble?"

"Not to amount to anything. Oh, hello, Dale! Had me ambushed right, didn't yuh?"

"You sounded like the whole gang coming at us," laughed Dale. "Congratulations, old man! How'd you put it over?"

"Easy enough," Hugh grinned, glancing from Dale's face to Quin. "I got on their trail right away and followed them on up toward Haystack. They camped in a box canyon—I don't know as you ever run across it, Quin; I know I never did before—and I laid low till I got a chance at 'em.

"They were kinda jumpy all night, and I didn't tackle it till this morning. They had the horses ready to go while Jack was cookin' breakfast. I held 'em up when they were ready to start

—made 'em tie up the reins on these three and start 'em down this way." He paused, glancing at Quin as if he half expected some comment from him.

"I didn't feel lucky enough to tackle bringin' in the bunch," he added apologetically, when Quin did not speak. "If one made a break, I knew they'd get me, because I was kinda shaky from not eatin' or sleepin', and they were fresh. Anyway, it was the horses I was after. So I held 'em there till the horses had got a pretty good start and then I beat it."

"How many was there, Hugh?"

"Why—four. Too many for me to handle and be sure I got the horses home safe too. Didn't Dale tell you how many there was?"

"Didn't know but what they might have split up," Quin explained. "Well, you did a good day's work, Hugh. Saved me a lot of trouble. Hawk! Come here, boy!"

Hawk, nibbling daintily at a twig of tender leaves, threw up his head and looked at his master, then turned and walked up to him, nodding playful how-de-do. Quin loosened Cynthy's saddle, lifted it off and replaced it with his own. Dale, dismounting to help, put Cynthy's saddle on the horse Quin had been riding. The sight of her fishing rod recalled a plan long deferred.

"Say, Hugh, if you'll lend me your tackle, I'll go fishing this afternoon," he said, partly to relieve a certain tension in the atmosphere—caused, he suspected, by Hugh's touchiness over not bringing in Bill Bradley. "Of course, you didn't get up to Bill's permanent hang-out, so you didn't get a line on my stuff that they carried off."

"No, of course not." Hugh frowned as if he read a reproach in that also. "They probably took that off up into Hungry Hollow somewhere." Then he added, "Sure, I'll lend you a rod and all the flies you want. Let's get going. I'm half starved."

"And here's my fly book; help yourself. You'll come back here for supper, won't yuh? If you want a real trout feed just turn your fish over to Lee Chow and let him fix 'em his own way. You'll say you never ate trout before in your life." In the big den Hugh, having finished a generous luncheon, laid a cased rod on the table and added reel and fly book while he spoke.

"Maybe you never tasted one of Cynthy's trout suppers!" Dale retorted. "I thought I'd walk over to Bear Creek and fish upstream to the ranch, and let her give us another trout feed. Of course, I don't expect you feel much like fishing after the trip you've had, but I thought I'd come back this

evening, and we could maybe thrash out some plan for getting back my stuff," Dale told him hopefully. "I could maybe have Quin help, but I hate to ask him, Hugh."

"Why? Didn't he fall for the idea of havin' you in the family?" Hugh's haggard face lightened with a grin made singularly unprepossessing by his swollen cheek and discolored eyelid.

"I don't know. I haven't asked him how he feels on that subject, but I do know he isn't burning up with zeal to help me out of the fix I got myself in. He thinks I'm an awful fool for trying to carry fifty thousand dollars around with me. I expect he thinks it served me right to lose my stuff, and now he's got his horse, you couldn't expect him to be very keen on chasing Bill Bradley up just to get my clothes. He said it was a case for the State militia to come and help round up my socks. I couldn't very well ask him to do anything about it after that!"

"Well, I've got to go to town this afternoon. I'd have gone before, only I had to go after the horses. Business at the bank. Why don't you let Bill Bradley keep your stuff? It's darn risky business, ridin' into Hungry Hollow—and for a bundle of clothes, it don't seem hardly worth while, does it? Make out a list of the things you want; I'll get 'em for you."

"Well, thanks, old man, I'll do that. But just the same, I don't mean to let Bill Bradley get away with it. My idea was that we could maybe ride up and find their hide-out and sneak in while they're gone. It isn't likely they'd all stick right there day and night, is it? They didn't make any haul this time and they're pretty apt to be on the prowl, I should think. And it doesn't seem to me they'll do their prowling down this way, either, for awhile."

Hugh took a restless turn up and down the room, pausing at the fireplace to stare thoughtfully up at the collection of old-fashioned guns over the mantel.

"Well, we might try it after I get back," he said indifferently. "Personally, I'm about fed up on hazin' around after Bill and his bunch. I come damn' near killin' him, up there. I didn't say anything to Quin—wouldn't be no use. But I didn't get them horses back as easy as it sounded. If I ever see that son-of-a-gun again, I'll kill 'im, sure as hell! I—" he bit his lip, shrugged his shoulders and started for his room. "Well, when I get back, we'll talk it over," he dismissed the subject. "Want any more clothes, Dale? Better take some shirts and things, anyway. Here, I'll get 'em for you. I s'pose you'll be stayin' down at Quin's again now—here's a grip you can pack

the stuff in. And don't go off without writin' down that list. I'll bring out all I can pack up from Dalton's on horseback; or if you want more than that, drive down after it. That polo stuff oughta be here too, in a day or two."

He paused in his hasty selection of clothing from Jim's dresser and looked at Dale over his shoulder.

"If you want the low-down on what I think about Bill Bradley, you might just as well kiss them clothes of yours good-by," he said. "I'm willin' to do what I can towards gettin' 'em back, but it's a darn slim chance, far as I can see."

"Maybe it is, Hugh. I'll own up it isn't the clothes altogether. I'd like to get my hands on the gentleman himself."

"Aw, go catch a fish and forget it!" exclaimed Hugh impatiently, turning again to getting Dale a temporary wardrobe before he turned to his own affairs. "Want me to take Quin's horse and saddle back? I can pack this stuff along too. If you fish to the ranch—"

"Why, that's so—thanks, Hugh. And tell Cynthy I'll have fish enough for the crowd when I get there, will you? Any idea when you'll be back?"

"Can't say. Day after to-morrow, maybe. Donna's in town—I might elope, you can't tell."

But Hugh's face was somber when he said it, as if it would not take much to turn that jest to earnest.

Dale packed the grip, grateful for Hugh's thoughtfulness, wrote a shopping list and a check for more than enough to cover the cost, and saw Hugh on his way, leading the extra horse, the grip riding securely roped in the saddle. It was not the kind of finish he had expected when he started out with Quin that morning, but after all, he thought, it was much better so. There was nothing much of the savage in Dale's nature, unless a dogged determination to carry through whatever he undertook to do may be counted a savage trait. He still meant to do that, but since Hugh was called away and his expedition must wait, for the time being he was very well content.

He wanted to be away from Cynthy to-day, for one thing, and give her a chance to talk things over with her father. Until she did that, Dale felt that his love-making was pretty much at a standstill—and no young man relishes that state of affairs. He had let Quin go on home alone, happy (Dale hoped) in his possession of Hawk. If Cynthy were as wise as he believed her to be, she would catch him now in that mood of contentment; then later Dale would stroll in with a nice basket of fish—Cynthy herself had given him the

cue for that, and he would tell her so too. He'd remind her that she had counted on her trout supper to raise Quin's spirits that first evening. It ought to help a little to-night.

He reached the creek which flowed down through the Burnett ranch, studied it for a few minutes and then proceeded to set up the borrowed rod, attach the reel and string the line. Hugh had a darn good tackle, he thought; a real sportsman, that boy, even if he were a Wyoming rancher. Now, if his flies were any good—a blue bottle ought to do pretty well this time of day, if Hugh had one, and he certainly should; a fellow with rod and reel like that would keep his fly book well stocked—

Dale pulled the book from his coat pocket, opened it and selected a fresh, unused bluebottle fly, turned it over in his fingers, looked at it more critically, and with thumb and finger still tightly holding the tiny silk-and-feather replica of the flies buzzing there over the oozy mud on the bank, he bent tight-lipped over the book spread open on his knee.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

DALE FINDS OUT

"WHY, Dale! You—where's your fish?" Cynthy set down her pan of fresh-picked peas on the edge of the porch and ran to meet Dale, striding down from the hill road. "Hugh said you were going to fish upstream and you'd be here in time for supper."

"Yes, well—I changed my plan. Where's your father, Cynthy?"

"Is it something about Bill's gang?" Cynthy sent a hasty look behind her. "Father's down around the stables somewhere, I think. He discovered a skinned place on Hawk's leg that looked as if he'd run against a sharp stub of some kind, and he's been doctoring that. Every man must have some weakness, I suppose," she smiled. "Well, Father's is that horse."

"Is there a place on this ranch, Cynthy, where we can talk and be safe from eavesdroppers?" Dale could not meet her mood at that moment.

"Well," Cynthy considered hurriedly, "the garden's right out in the open and we could pick

more peas, I guess. Wait till I dump these under the porch and I'll go back with you. Mother," she explained significantly, "is in the milk house at this particular moment, but there's no telling when she'll come out and start asking questions, so come on."

"I want your dad in on this conference, though. Would it be cataclysmic if he should join us up in the garden?"

In the midst of her alarm at Dale's look and manner, Cynthy laughed and said it would not, because her father liked to come up and help in the garden. It was another one of his pets, she explained, perhaps second only to Hawk in his affections.

"I'll go find him, then, and let him lead me up where you are. I've simply got to consult you both, dear, and I'd rather tell it just once and get it over with. And it's something that must not be—"

"I hear Mother. Beat it, Dale, and get Father!" and Cynthy, hurriedly throwing a milk pan full of peas where they would not be seen, ran away up the grassy path to the garden, as Dale made his way to the stables. Probably they both thanked heaven that the corner of the house hid them from the sight of any one coming from the milk house. And even Cynthy's mother, a good but trouble-

some woman, as you all know, saw nothing suspicious in the fact that Dale and Quin went strolling together up to the garden where Cynthy was picking peas. Her most tangible thought was probably a casual thankfulness that they had patched up that quarrel they had at the supper table a few nights ago.

"Well, what you found out?" Quin demanded almost querulously, when they had reached Cynthy and stopped beside her in the green fragrant rows. "Anything new about Neal?" He glanced toward the house, as if he half feared that even so far away the wretched story would leak to the ears of his wife. "That boy's innocent or he's a mighty bad egg—I don't know which."

"I don't know anything about Neal," Dale said tensely, "this concerns Hugh. He lent me fishing tackle and fly book, and when I went to select a fly—you remember, Cynthy, those flies I showed you that I had made? The fly book was stolen and then returned, remember, with some of the flies missing. Then that afternoon, when it began raining, I made up some others and filled up the book again.

"Well, like you in recognizing Neal on horseback, I can't very well explain just how I know my own flies, but I do. When a thing grows under your own fingers—anyway, my flies were in

Hugh's book. That nearly knocked me over. Twice when I was robbed my flies were taken. And they could only get into Hugh's possession in one way."

"What else? You didn't stop there, did you?"

"No," said Dale with a click of his teeth, "you can bet I didn't stop there! If Hugh had the flies, it was logical to guess he had the other stuff of mine. It would account for our not finding any tracks except under my window and along that side of the house.

"See how it figures out! I was tied, bound and gagged in my bed. All right, they could take my suit cases and little trunk out through the window easily enough, carry them to the corner of the house and shove them through another window or onto the porch—with one of those heavy Navajo rugs laid on the porch, they could very easily take the baggage back into the house and I'd never hear it."

"Well," said Cynthy breathlessly, "did you find your things?"

"Not at first. I had to go about it in such a way that Lee Chow wouldn't discover what I was up to. First I went to my room, made sure he was in his little cabin, and then made a thorough search of the house, closets and so on till I came to Hugh's bedroom. He's got one regular closet

and another blind closet—good-sized one, at that, opening off it. I discovered that the partition across the end of his room next the den has been set into the room about four feet. Then that is partitioned too, leaving a fine dark room about four feet square. I really don't believe it was made with any dishonest purpose, Mr. Burnett. There are shelves and an amateur developing and printing outfit for kodaks and a gasoline lamp with reflector—Hugh has used it for making his own pictures. Good idea too, so far from town. My stuff is in there, neatly stacked under the bottom shelf; all of it, except those three books Bill Bradley cut to pieces over on Grey Bull.

Quin stood up, a hand upon the small of his back while he glanced around the place. Then he knelt upon one knee and began absently twitching fat pea pods from the vines and throwing them one by one into the pan beside Cynthy. His wide hat brim hid his face from Dale.

"I thought that's about where you'd find your clothes," he said, in a flat tired voice. "Somewhere in the house. Everything pointed to Hugh, but I kept hopin' I'd be able to keep him outa trouble over it. Hugh ain't bad at heart, but they're hard up, and fifty thousand dollars was just too big a temptation. It'd take half of it to clean up the mortgage on the ranch, and what

Hugh owes around here and there I don't know, but it's a lot. If you'd put the money in the bank like I told you to—

"But you couldn't see what you was doin' to that boy, of course. Some folks never do see how they encourage crime by leavin' the door wide open to it. I didn't care anything about you losin' the money; if you was fool enough to pack it around with you and flaunt it in the faces of folks that needed it worse than you did and would help themselves to it, that was your lookout, not mine. But Hugh's weak. I've been tryin' to keep him on the right side of the law till he woke up and settled down to business. Jim turned out pretty well after his first wild oats was sowed, and I thought Hugh would too. He's got to learn that a ranch won't run itself, though. Them boys up there—" he broke off suddenly to look searchingly at Dale. "Is there any sign of they're bein' mixed up in this crooked work? Bird and Ned and the rest?"

"Not so far." Dale shook his head. "My impression is that they attend strictly to business and let Hugh come and go without question or comment. Their attitude yesterday seemed to show that—don't you think so, Cynthy?"

"Yes, it did." Cynthy did not look up. "Father and I were sure it was Hugh, and I went up yesterday morning to be a kind of bodyguard and

coax you down here, till Father came back with the authority to arrest Hugh, if necessary. Then Bill and Jack and the rest threw me all off—the way Bill acted toward Hugh, and taking the horses and all. I wasn't so sure it was Hugh, then. But the boys—they're pretty well trained, if they're in with him. I couldn't get a flicker of guilt there."

"Well, we'll mighty quick find out. The thing to do is go get your stuff and haul it down here. Hugh's team oughta be taken back anyway, and I'll drive on up with you and bring back your baggage. We've just about got time before supper, if we hurry, and the boys oughta be home when we get there. If they know anything about that baggage stealin', I'll find out when we go after it. Cynthy, you go tell your mother you're comin' along with us. We can both identify Dale's grips and trunks, and I want you for a witness." Once more he stood up, squinting at the sun. "We better get started if we're goin' to get back for supper. I want to have Neal at the house when we unload the stuff."

His quiet efficiency amazed Dale, swept him into unquestioning obedience. Without another word they left the garden and hurried to the stable to get the team ready. Cynthy calmly gathered up the peas she had thrown under the porch and

took them in for Judy to shell, and told her mother they were going after Dale's stuff and to wait supper if they were a little late getting home.

She was down in the stable yard in time to help Dale hitch the sorrel team to the buggy, and seemed to take it for granted that she was expected to ride with him instead of with her father. And just because Quin made no comment whatever upon that arrangement Dale would cheerfully have given a thousand dollars for the power to read his thoughts.

"Well, the boys cleared themselves in fine shape," Quin observed, with a sigh of relief, as Dale climbed back into the seat with Cynthy and her father, after closing the Mowerby gate behind the spring wagon.

"How, Father? I didn't know you said anything to them about it." Cynthy flushed a little and tried to appear absolutely unconscious of Dale's arm which slid around her as she spoke.

"Didn't have to say anything. Got all I wanted to know just by watchin' em while we were there. I was a little afraid I might have to make a clean sweep there. I thought maybe the Chink would be in it too."

"Still, a Chinaman's face is made of wood,"

Dale remarked, yielding to the reckless temptation to give Cynthy a squeeze.

"Yeah, but even wood'll give under a heavy shock. (Crowdin' yuh, Cynthy? Maybe Dale'll move over a little.) Lee took it for granted you'd want your stuff down to our place if you're goin' to stay there. He didn't know you'd lost it, did he?"

"Well, he wasn't supposed to." On the strength of Quin's hint, Dale boldly pulled Cynthy closer to him.

"Hugh was playin' a lone hand, far as the folks on the ranch are concerned. Worth a lot to know that. Oughta be able to get a line on Neal, next."

What he meant to do after he had determined Neal's guilt or innocence, Quin did not say. And Dale, wholly engrossed in the near presence of Cynthy, forgot to ask him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DREAMS DO COME TRUE

"WELL, Mother, it seems kinda tough to go off and leave you holdin' down the ranch alone with Judy. Maybe you better change your mind and come along," Quin said, when, dressed for the trip he had decided was necessary, the family rose from the breakfast table next morning. "I've got to take Neal along, you know. Got some business to attend to and I want him to sign the papers."

Almost any other woman would have felt prompted by that mysterious statement to ask several questions concerning the business which made Neal Somers' presence in town a necessity. But Mrs. Burnett was different.

"I wouldn't sleep in one of them hotel beds again if you paid me for it," she declared. "And you know well enough what I think of that sanitarium couch Rose has got. You tell Donna she better come home. Gaddin' around Cheyenne is no way to rest up from school, and I don't see what you let her stay for. Here's a list of things

I want you should get. Judy and I are goin' to tie a couple of comforters while we've got the house to ourselves, and I don't know but what we're liable to run outa battin' and yarn. You let Cynthy pick out the yarn, Quin."

Quin took the list, slid it into his inner pocket of his coat, turned glassy-eyed for a second, as men will when they suddenly realize that they have forgotten something, and pulled out a letter which he handed to Dale.

"They gave me that at the hotel," he said blankly. "I meant to give it to you before, but it kinda slipped my mind."

"For the land's sake, Quin!" his wife censured him fretfully. "You're gettin' old, but that's no excuse for bein' as childish and forgetful as you are lately. What'll Mr. Emery think of you—packin' his mail around like that?"

"Why, that's quite all right, I'm sure," Dale hastily soothed her. "I couldn't have answered it before, anyway. It doesn't matter in the least, Mrs. Burnett." But the look on his face when he saw the return address did not quite harmonize with the words. He excused himself rather hastily and read the letter in his own room, and he was preoccupied all the way to town, in spite of his efforts to throw off the thoughts that nagged at him. To discuss the subject uppermost in their

minds was impossible because of Neal's surly presence.

Quin and Cynthy, sensing Dale's fresh worry, made no attempt at desultory conversation. They were a silent quartette on that long ride to town, and from their general atmosphere they might have been on their way to the funeral of a friend.

But at the hotel where Quin decided they had best make their first stop, Dale shook off his depressed mood. Cynthy and her father must be told something, and it could not wait any longer. Neal had got out of the car and disappeared when they stopped at the hotel, and it was a simple matter for Dale to call Quin and Cynthy into his room.

"This letter—it's from Mr. Kittridge, my Chicago banker," he said. "Kittridge is the one who settled my father's estate—he died a year and more ago—and nagged about my carrying a large sum of cash west with me, so I finally got my back up and took almost all I had in the bank.

"Well, that robbery stunt that was pulled on me here seems to have gotten under the old man's skin. If you'll pardon me, I'll just read his letter —and the enclosure—and save time. Kittridge says:

"Mr. Teasdale Emery [and so forth]
"My dear Emery:

"News of the robbery perpetrated in Cheyenne, in which you lost the $50,000.00 currency which you had in your possession at the time, has led me to believe that possibly I was in a measure responsible for the outrage.

"I am therefore enclosing a letter which will explain itself and which may be of some slight service to you in clearing up the affair and, I trust, apprehending the criminals.

"I may add that the lease upon your Halstead Street property has been renewed and the sum of—[er—well, it may be as well, Mr. Burnett, to let you know about how I stand back there]—the sum of $45,000 credited to your account.

"Trusting that you will be fortunate enough to recover the money lost in the robbery, and that you will appreciate the fact that I acted in good faith and for your best interests, I am

"Very truly yours,
"John L. Kittridge

"And here's the letter he encloses—rather, a carbon copy of a letter:

"Mr. James D. Mowerby, Cashier
"Stockgrowers' Trust and Savings Bank
"Cheyenne, Wyoming.
"My dear Mr. Mowerby:

"I am writing you in my personal capacity as the

friend and financial advisor of Mr. Teasdale Emery, a client of this bank.

"Mr. Emery is making a visit to your town for the purpose of looking over the country thereabout with a view to purchasing a cattle ranch of some kind. Mr. Emery is carrying upon his person the sum of $50,000 in currency.

"I shall deem it a great personal favor to me if you will make an effort to meet Mr. Emery and, if it is possible without disclosing this information or antagonizing him in any way, persuade him to deposit in your bank whatever cash he may have with him. A friendly suggestion that you will be glad, as a correspondent of our bank, to take care of any financial matter for him, should produce the result desired.

"Mr. Emery is an estimable young man—"

[Dale inwardly gloated over the legitimate excuse for bringing this paragraph to Quin's attention, though he did stutter a little over the actual reading of it.]

"—an estimable young man but inclined to be headstrong, and I fear that in attempting to dissuade him from carrying this large sum of money with him I made the mistake of antagonizing him to a certain degree. I trust that you will be able to repair my error, and in any event I beg to offer you my thanks

and appreciation for any service you may be able to render my friend and client.

"Very truly yours,

"JOHN L. KITTRIDGE
"Vice President
"La Salle County Trust & Savings Bank
"Chicago, Ill."

"Jim told?" Cynthy turned and stared rather wild-eyed at her father. "Jim! Why, it doesn't seem possible, Dale! He's been in that bank—why, they think the world and all of Jim!"

"I've been wonderin' about Jim," Quin said gravely. "It's his ranch legally. Hugh has been runnin' behind pretty bad with it, but I knew it was Jim that was worryin' over the mortgage. Buyin' a home here in town and raisin' a family costs money, these days, and I knew somethin' or other would have to break pretty soon. Rose sent for me because she's scared about Jim. He ain't eatin' nor sleepin' lately, and she kinda suspicioned somethin' was wrong at the bank and didn't know what to do. I went and asked Jim if anything was wrong, and he put me off. Needed a vacation, he said.

"Well," he sighed, "there's two of 'em gone wrong. I made up my mind I wouldn't shield 'em—"

"You don't have to, Mr. Burnett. Look here. I

did a lot of thinking on the way in, and it seems to me this thing can be settled without any publicity, if you are willing. They didn't get anything after all—"

"What about the money they got here in town?" Quin demanded sharply. "Couple of hundred, wasn't it?"

"Who knows who got it? Any yegg could have crawled in the window—well, let's leave that for the present. Don't you suppose, Mr. Burnett, they've had their lesson? I don't go much on putting men away in penitentiaries without giving them a chance to change their ways. You say they're badly in debt, with the ranch mortgaged and so on. You also say this money hunt of theirs is my fault, because I'd no business to have that much with me to tempt them. Now it's over, I'll admit you're right.

"Now, suppose I buy them out for cash? I want that ranch and I'd have made Hugh an offer before, if I had thought he would consider selling. Then if they cleared out—or Hugh, we'll say. I—excuse me a moment."

Some one had rapped on the door, and he opened it to admit Hugh. The three stared at him in stunned silence. Hugh's face was white, his eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot, his tawny hair was a rumpled mop. He came in and pushed

it shut with his elbow and stood with his back against it while he looked at them.

"Look here," he said harshly, "I know what you folks are here for—Neal told me you've got wise, somehow. He crawled a freight train headin' west. But there ain't any runnin' blood in me—I want to know what you're going to do about it?"

"Where's Jim?" Quin stood up, eyeing him bleakly. "Before we go into this, we ought to have Jim here."

"Hell, what d' you want Jim for? He didn't do anything—only show me the letter he'd got from Chicago, just as a sample of the luck some people have in this world. Dale here, packin' fifty thousand dollars around just to be smart, and us ready to lose every foot of land and every hoof we owned! That much money would put us on our feet; with him it was just something to play with. It made me sore.

"Jim didn't know anything about it till after the fracas here in the hotel, and then of course—we had it out, then. I told him straight I was goin' to get that money. Jim didn't want me to. He begged me not to—bankers are so damn' *honest!* But Jim offered to use the bank money to pay off the interest if I'd lay off this other. We had it back and forth all one night, nearly. There was Rose and the kids—he couldn't risk losin'

his job and goin' to jail. I told him that. I told him I'd get this fifty thousand—

"Well, I've been crooked before. You know that, Quin. I got to runnin' with Bill and Jack, is how it started. And Neal—him and I used to find out things Bill wanted to know, and he'd go do the job and split with us. I never did anything much myself—just helped Bill. Neal too. So I told Bill about this fifty thousand comin' to town, and he agreed to help get it and take a third, because it was my job. I was goin' to make it my job. Jim don't know anything about Bill, though. He thinks I was tryin' to pull this alone and it was my first attempt." He turned a desolate look on Dale.

"I swiped your clothes, Dale," he said frankly. "They're at the house, in my closet. I didn't much believe you had the stuff with you, after all, but you kept sayin' you did have it, and Bill was like a lion smellin' blood—he wouldn't lay off, once I let him in on it. He kept at me to get it.

"Like over on Grey Bull. That was his scheme —tyin' us both up and scarin' you a little. I never dreamed the damn' thief would—and he double-crossed me. Or he was goin' to, if he'd got the jack.

"So that's the how of it. I'm ready to go—but for God's sake don't drag Jim in. If I plead

guilty, you won't have to go into how I heard about it in the first place—"

Dale walked up to him then and took him by both shoulders and talked for three minutes without stopping, looking Hugh straight in the eyes all the while. He saw the hard defiance slowly leave Hugh's face, saw it quiver, saw the tight lips loosen and droop at the corners, saw the tears slip over his blinking lids and slide unheeded down his cheeks.

But a man doesn't stare for long upon the bared soul of another, and Dale, blinking his own eyes with a suspicious moisture on the lashes, turned and grinned over his shoulder at the others.

"Hugh and I have got some business over at the bank," he said, his voice not entirely steady. "Goin' to buy a ranch and raise polo ponies, with Hugh for ranch superintendent. He's cured, I'll bet on that. You folks have got your shopping to do, and I suppose you'll want to see Donna and Mrs. Jim—and Cynthy has something she wants to ask you, Mr. Burnett. Suppose we all meet here, along about dinner time, and you be my guests at dinner. Bring Donna and Jim and Mrs. Jim—Hugh and I'll be on time, never fear!" He smiled that strange, heart-twisting smile which Cynthy had spoken of, and it is quite likely that her heart gave its customary flop.

"Cynthy's question don't need askin'," Quin said, after he had swallowed something that seemed rather difficult to go down. "You can have the weddin' any time you two are a mind to."

THE END

Bullock's
Los Angeles